

Sermon for October 25, 2015 – 22nd Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 12:28–34 (NIV84)

Theme: It's all about love!

- 1) *The perfect love God requires.*
- 2) *The perfect love Christ reveals.*

²⁸ *One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”* ²⁹ *“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’* ³⁰ *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’* ³¹ *The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”* ³² *“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him.* ³³ *To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* ³⁴ *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.*

When you hear the word “religion,” what thoughts come to your mind? Do you think about people genuflecting, praying or performing other customs for their god? Ceremonies and sacrifices - doing certain things in a specific way in order to earn favor with god – this is how the world views religion.

And we Christians are not immune to such thinking. We also are inclined to view our religion in terms of our worship, liturgies, prayers and offerings. We are often tempted to believe that these acts – in and of themselves - set us right with God.

But is this true? No, for as Jesus will instruct us today, true religion **is all about love**: 1) *The perfect love God requires.* 2) *The perfect love Christ reveals.*

Part One: The perfect love God requires.

It was the busy Tuesday of Holy week. Jesus was in the temple and, right before the events of our sermon text, some Sadducees (religious scholars who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead) tried to make Jesus look foolish by asking him an absurd question about life after the resurrection (in which they didn't believe).

Jesus' response not only showed the foolishness of the Sadducees' question, it also revealed them as being both ignorant and unbelieving regarding the Scriptures.

And this is where our text breaks in: *One of the teachers of the law [a Pharisee] came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them [the Sadducees] a good [that is, a beautifully,*

biblically, correct] *answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”*

A little background is needed to understand why the man ask this question: the Pharisees counted a total of 613 commandments. Most of these laws were a bunch of nit-picking formalism – for example: Eating with unwashed hands is a sin. *If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.*” (Mat 23:18 NIV84)

Now think about it for a moment. Jesus is in the temple, surrounded by all sorts of rituals – most of which were commanded by God himself, although some were of human origin. This was the center of the Jewish religion. Certainly the greatest command must be something like keeping the Passover ordinance, or making sure that sacrificial offerings are perfect – without defect. The Pharisees were zealous for such laws.

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. What a response! Let me explain (word by word) Jesus’ prelude to the greatest commandment.

Hear, O Israel - listen very carefully to what I am about to say, O people graciously chosen by God.

the LORD - the great “I am” who created the universe in six days, who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who performed wonders through Moses and gave great promises of salvation. This LORD is not just a god, He is . . .

our God – whose Fatherly heart graciously chose to save us unworthy sinners from eternity. The blood of his Son redeemed us from all sin and, by the work of his gracious Spirit, he adopted us as his own. We belong to Him and He belongs to us.

the LORD is One: there is no one like him. He is the only God. He is the only LORD.

Because of who the LORD is and his saving relationship to us, it is only natural that the greatest commandment of all is: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*’

What does God demand from us? Nothing less than our total love and commitment in response to who He is. The Lord wants us to love him with every fiber of our being. Every thought in our mind and desire of our heart, every choice we make and action we take ought to stem from our total love for the Lord.

Let me explain this in another way: the Lord doesn’t demand that we try to fit Him into our busy life. He demands that we fit our life into him! Every moment of every second of our life is to be dedicated to him - remembering His word and fulfilling His will. Why? Not because we are afraid of being punished if we don’t, but out of total love for who He is. This is the religion God not only desires; it is the religion he rightfully demands.

But wait, there's more: *The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these.*"

This second command is really an extension of the first. How so? Because the Scriptures clearly indicate that one of the best ways we can show love to God is by loving our neighbor.

Now, understand this commandment correctly. We aren't being commanded to "like" everyone. God wants us to *love* everyone (including our enemies) with the same love we have for ourselves. And how do we express love for ourselves? We feed, clothe, educate, nurture, encourage and pray for ourselves. God wants us to express this very same love to others.

There you have it: all of God's commands summarized in one word: love.

"Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

This particular man got the point. Do we? Our sinful nature often tempts us to be like Pharisees: that fulfilling outward forms like the act of coming to church, making offerings, how we pray, how we worship, and that the performance of other traditions make us right with God when they actually don't.

Now don't get me wrong, I am not saying that our religious traditions aren't important. They are very important. The Lord himself established many of the customs and rites of Old Testament worship as a means of directing the attention of the worshipers to himself, his works, and his love. This is also the purpose our customs and traditions have today. The problem is not the customs themselves, but our failure to use them as means of directing our hearts to God. And when we don't offer our heart to God, we offer the sacrifice of Cain.

You remember the story of Cain and Abel, don't you? Both were sons of Adam. Both offered sacrifices to the Lord. God accepted Abel's offering, but rejected Cain's. Why? Because Cain did not give his offering in faith. His heart was not on the Lord.

God himself says: *I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.* (Hos 6:6 NIV84) The Scriptures also say: *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.* (Psalm 51:16-17 NIV84)

Total, perfect love towards God and our fellow man: this is the religion God desires. Understanding this truth put this particular Pharisee on the right path of salvation – as we read in our text: *When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."*

You are not far from the kingdom of God? Why did Jesus say this? If the Pharisee understood that true worship of God is all about love, wouldn't that have placed him in the kingdom of God?

Not quite yet. There were two more steps for this Pharisee: 1) acknowledging and confessing that we are completely incapable of loving God the way he demands. 2) looking in faith to the one who showed perfect love to God and all humanity in order to save us from our sins.

Part Two: *The perfect love Christ reveals.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ - with the exception of Jesus - there is not a single person on this earth who has or ever will love the Lord as perfectly as He demands.

And that's really the point, isn't it? God wants us to recognize our total sinfulness – that without him we are loveless and lost. We need to be the objects of His divine love.

And, by God's grace, that is exactly what we are: objects of God's divine love! You know the passage, so don't be afraid to say it with me: *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* (John 3:16 NIV84)

Jesus himself is the fulfillment of God's command to love. He showed perfect love to the Lord by submitting to every aspect of His Father's will for our salvation. Speaking about his coming betrayal and crucifixion, Jesus once said to his disciples: *the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.* (John 14:31, NIV84)

Even though we lack the perfect love God requires, the LORD has made us the object of his divine love, as the Holy Spirit inspired St. John to write: *This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* (1 John 4:9-10. NIV84)

Jesus lived the perfect life of love we all failed to live – thereby winning the righteousness we need to be saved. Jesus also took our record of sin upon himself – suffering the punishment we deserved for our lack of perfect love. Because of this we stand forgiven before God. Through faith in this work we are saved.

But Christ's perfect work doesn't just stop at saving us - it also changes us. When the LORD called us to repentance and faith, he didn't just take away our sins, he created a new person in our hearts – an attitude that truly desires to love God with its whole heart, soul mind and strength, and to love its neighbor as itself. In view of God's great love for us, St. Paul encourages us to live according to the new man the Holy Spirit placed in our hearts. He writes: *Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.* (Ephesians 4:32 - 5:2, NIV84).

Brothers and sisters in Christ: what is real religion all about? It's all about the perfect love God requires for himself and our neighbor, but that we, due to our sinfulness, are unable to express. More importantly, however, true religion is all about the divine, saving love God expressed to us in Christ, because of which we alone are saved, and through which we alone are able to love God and our fellow man with a true heart – all to the glory of Christ's name. Amen.