

Juniper Green Parish Church
Sunday 29th October 2017:
Sermon: The Great Commandment

Matthew 22:34-46 (NIV) The Greatest Commandment

³⁴ 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.”^[a]

³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’^[b] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Whose Son Is the Messiah?

⁴¹ While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, ⁴² “What do you think about the Messiah? 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.”’^[c]

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.

Sermon

Today’s Gospel reading from Matthew is filled with a series of questions and responses.

First, the Pharisees questioned Jesus about the commandments in order to “test” him, and Jesus responds with the well-known words,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And then he goes on to add,

“And a second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’

But Jesus had some questions of his own. “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?”

And the Pharisees got themselves tied into knots by trying to be too clever and ultimately were unable to answer Jesus.

Upon first reading, it seems like the primary message in this reading is straight forward: Love God and love your neighbour.

But if we think about the words Jesus is saying, this scripture is more difficult than it first sounds.

Love God with all your heart. How do you do that?
How do you love God with all your soul?
How do you love something with all your mind?

We usually love things we can see, touch, smell, taste, and hear.

How do we love God, something we can't always experience with our senses?
How do we experience God in general?
Who is considered to be my neighbour?

Jesus' commandment, which is the core of this Gospel passage, is not as straightforward as it first seems.

There are over 600 commandments in the Old Testament, and the Pharisees are really challenging Jesus when they ask him which commandment above all the rest is the greatest.

And Jesus answered this question by naming not one but two commandments from the Hebrew Scriptures. The words that Jesus used for the first part of this commandment

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" comes from Deuteronomy 6:5 and makes up part of the Jewish Shema.

The Shema is the most prominent prayer in the Jewish tradition. It is a prayer that serves as a cornerstone for the Jewish faith. Hence, the first part of the commandment that Jesus gave was most likely no great surprise to the Pharisees. They heard it before and knew it well.

However, what probably was surprising to the Pharisees was the second commandment that Jesus combined together with the first. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

This commandment comes from Leviticus 19:18 and was a much lesser known commandment than the first one Jesus talks about.

Jesus challenged the Pharisees. How can you put love of neighbour on the same level of love of God?
And how can you love your neighbour if you don't love yourself?

Love of self is implied in order to love one's neighbour. Hence we have three great commandments:

Love of God,
love of neighbour, and
love of self.

Probably not what the Pharisees were expecting to hear.

What is at the centre of our lives?

What are the things we decide to make time for? Maybe it's time with family or friends or maybe its work or hobbies, or sports.

But, how often do we love God ahead of everything else? How often do we love our neighbours?

This commandment is hard to live out in our lives for many of us because it requires us to put God and love of neighbour at the centre of what we do.

This isn't always an easy thing for us in the busyness of our daily lives. It requires us to love the people around us even when it is most challenging for us to do.

By requiring us to love all people, no matter how difficult it maybe, Jesus is inviting us to offer unconditional love.

Jesus' life, and his commandment in this reading, tells us that love is at the very centre of who God is and who we are called to be.

This commandment, which seems difficult for us to fully accomplish by ourselves, only becomes possible when we remember that God is utterly committed to loving us.

Hence we are commanded, to put love above all else, knowing for certain that God will always and forever love us.

Jesus asks the Pharisees a question (Matthew 22:41-46)

And in this discourse, Jesus asks the Pharisees a pair of related questions—**“What do you think of the Christ?”** and **“Whose son is he?”** (v. 42). The Pharisees answer, **“Of David.”**

David, of course, was Israel's greatest king—the one under whose reign Israel became a great nation. The Jews looked forward to the day that the Son of David would come again to liberate Israel from Roman domination and re-establish it as a great nation.

But Jesus had not come to meet traditional expectations—to fill David's shoes as an earthly king and a warrior.

Yes, he is the son of David, but, more to the point, he is the Son of God—a fact that God announced both at Jesus' baptism (3:17) and transfiguration (17:5).

Verse 43: He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’?”

The phrase, “David in the Spirit,” means that Jesus ascribes the authorship of Psalm 110 to David, to which his listeners, including the Pharisees, would agree.

This psalm is not simply the product of David's literary ability, but was inspired by the Spirit of God, a fact with which Jesus' listeners would also agree.

Verse 44: ⁴⁴The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."

The quotation is from Psalm 110:1

The Hebrew version of scripture reads: "Yahweh says to my Lord"—making it clear that Yahweh is the first Lord mentioned. When Jesus quoted this Psalm to his questioner, he would have used the Hebrew version—or an Aramaic version, closely related to the Hebrew.

Verse 45: If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?"

The only possibility, then, is that the second Lord of Psalm 110:1 is the Messiah of God—who is not David's son but David's Lord.

Therefore, the Pharisees—these highly trained religious experts who tried to embarrass Jesus—were wrong when they answered that the Messiah is David's son.

This seems a highly technical argument, but the identity of the Messiah and the Messiah's relationship to David are very important to these Pharisees and to the Jews.

The experts in the Law, asked a question of Jesus, a layperson, a "nobody from Nazareth," hoping to embarrass him (v. 36).

But Jesus embarrassed them by demonstrating that their answer was incorrect.

Jesus, the lay person, out argues the trained professionals, the Pharisees and scribes, who can do nothing but go home having been put in their place.

That is the point of verses 41-46.

Verse 46: ⁴⁶No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

From then on, Jesus taught the crowds and his disciples (23:1). He subsequently only addressed the scribes and Pharisees to denounce them publicly as hypocrites.

And for us today. What do we learn from this reading?

Yes we love God, love our neighbour and love ourselves.

But how do we express our love for God - through worship and serving him in looking after his people is one answer.

I had the privilege of leading worship here a year ago and therefore an appropriate question that we can ask ourselves today is what has changed over the past year.

We are aware of physical changes to the building taking place or are at an advanced stage of planning.....and such work is brought about through people offering their time, talent, money and love of God to make such changes.

We also show our love through making pastoral visits and helping one another through the challenges of life.

You are also undertaking a number of initiatives where your motivation is love for God and his people.

Messy Church is established and that is a great way for making contact with the wider community and showing your love for the community.

As indeed are your initiatives associated with men's fellowship, Guild fellowship, the prayers and work of the nurture team, the gift of Christmas show boxes through Blythswood for children in Eastern Europe, support of Fresh Start, and of course your recent appointment of Heather Merriman as your family worker.

This list is not exhaustive but are all examples of putting love into action mentioned in your autumn magazine.

So well done.....keep going and continue to offer your love unconditionally to all whom you meet this day and in the days ahead.

And if you meet "doubting Thomases" who question the divinity of Jesus Christ or the existence of God, remind

them that Jesus made many claims, he worked with remarkable power, he lived with perfect purity and he was seen by many people after his death on the cross, and hence there are only 3 possible outcomes of who Jesus was and is:

He was either a liar, or a magician or he was who he said he was.....and we know the answer to that question don't we, because we can feel that love in this place and in our hearts.

“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 neighbour as yourself. Amen

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