

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fourth Sunday in Lent, March 14, 2010

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Hymns: 294, 179, 295, 297, 285.

Deuteronomy 5:32-6:9, 1 Corinthians 12:31-13:3, Matthew 22:34-40.

Sermon Text: Mark 12:28-34.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

You heard today another attempt by the Pharisees, here represented by "*One of the teachers of the law*", to trap Jesus in his words. He is asked about which of all the commandments is the most important. If he were to pick out any one command as the greatest to the exclusion of others, many of the Jews, including the common people, could be upset with him, and the teachers of the law would have good reason to criticize him endlessly. But, of course, his time of life here on earth was coming to a close. On Friday of the current week he would be crucified.

This question had traditionally been a subject of great debate among the Pharisees themselves. By Jesus' time, "*the teachers of the law*" had subdivided and expanded God's commandments into hundreds of laws, by one count 613. These 613 were broken down into 248 positive commands – things they must do – and 365 negative commands – things they must not do. Naturally, some of these laws were bound to be considered more important than others, and led to a great deal of applying rules differently to different situations and often subtle, deceptive reasoning. The question for Jesus today was

"OF ALL THE COMMANDMENTS, WHICH IS THE MOST IMPORTANT?"

- 1. The question was asked to trap Jesus, but he answers from the Word of God.**
- 2. He gives a two-part answer, and we are reminded of the proper uses of the Law.**
- 3. This really should have pointed people to the real way they are saved eternally,**
- 4. Not by trying to obey the Law but believing Jesus did it for them.**

Jesus had no difficulty answering. God's will, as summarized in his Law, has to do with man's relationship to God and with man's relationship to man. The answer therefore must be clear from scripture, and it is. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" Deuteronomy 6:4-5. He also quotes Leviticus: "*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*" Leviticus 19:18. The Deuteronomy passage is found in the chapter immediately after what we call the Ten Commandments. It is the beginning of all the rules and laws that the Lord God gave them for their civil lives and for their ceremonial lives, that is, their religious lives.

Jesus here is talking about loving God with all our hearts. We must love him with all our heart, because he is one Lord, the only true God and there is no other like him. And so we must love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves, because he is of the same nature with ourselves; our hearts are fashioned alike, and my neighbor and myself are both creations of God. There is no other commandment greater than these; for in these all the law is fulfilled, and if we obey these two commandments, all other instances of obedience will follow.

That Jesus puts these commandments together as "the greatest" should surprise no one who has really looked at the Ten Commandments and what we identify as the "two tables" of the law. (Look at the diagram at

the end of this sermon.) We recognize the first table of the law as the first three commandments, those which point out our responsibility to the Lord God. And we recognize the second table of the law as the last seven commandments, those which point out our responsibility to our fellow humans.

We are told that the passage from Deuteronomy which Jesus quotes was a very familiar passage for Old Testament believers, since it was part of the prayer all pious Israelites were expected to pray three times a day. ***"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."*** There was no doubt in their minds that this was the most important commandment. What was new about Jesus' answer was that he placed the commandment, ***'Love your neighbor as yourself'*** on the same level with the other commandment. ***"There is no commandment greater than these."***

It is easy to say we love God above everyone and everything, but the proof of it usually becomes visible in our actions towards our fellowmen whoever they are. We are to love them as much as ourselves, in that way excluding all selfishness. Clearly this "love" goes far beyond "like." One's heart cannot be right with God if it is not right with one's fellowmen. True love toward God, according to the first table of the law, must show itself in love toward the neighbor, in accordance with the second table of the law. And true love of the neighbor flows from the true love of God as its source.

In his first letter, St. John tells us by inspiration of God: ***"If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother."*** 1 John 4:15-21.

It is also in our neighbor that God would be loved by us. The words indicate two commandments, but the sense implies only one commandment. Love has a twofold aim, whether directed to God in heaven or mankind on earth, but it is always the same. The importance of these two commandments is emphasized further when Jesus says, as Matthew records, ***"All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."*** Matthew 22:40. That means "everything God said in the Old Testament" starts with these two commandments.

We must remember the true purpose of God's Law. ***"Before this faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith."*** Galatians 3:23-24. From the King James Version, we have the picture of a schoolmaster or tutor who is put in charge: ***"But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith."*** Galatians 3:23-24

Do you remember the purpose of the Law? The letters SOS? The Law "Shows Our Sinfulness", the Law "Shows Our Sins". More precisely, we learned that the Law of God has three purposes: One: As a curb to prevent to some degree the coarse outbreaks of sin among all men, Two: as a mirror to show the sinfulness of all men, and Three: as a guideline for the believer to show us the will of God, the way he wants us to behave and live. Today we emphasize the mirror. If the teacher of the law who brought this question to Jesus really understood the law, he would know that there is no way he could obey it perfectly, well enough to be saved eternally. The Law as a mirror would show his sinfulness. However, many think that they can obey God's law well enough so that God will overlook their shortcomings. That self-righteousness, that kind of work-righteousness is shot down by God's plain word. Deuteronomy 18:13 tells us: ***"You must be blameless before the LORD your God."*** Leviticus 19:2 tells us: ***"Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be***

holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." And in the New Testament James tells us ***"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it."*** James 2:10.

Every human must realize that absolute perfection is necessary to earn our way into heaven with our own lives. So that question and Jesus' answer should have shown the hearers the futility of seeking to obey the Old Covenant of Law to earn their salvation. The Old Covenant of the Law does not give us salvation because of our obedience. It is the new covenant of the Gospel which saves us. It is Jesus Christ's perfect obedience that gives us salvation. We are reminded of Christ's Words as he instituted the Lord's Supper. Matthew, Mark, Luke and the apostle Paul tell us: "Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you; this is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" Some have memorized: "this cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you for the remission of sins; this do, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me."

In summary, the Old Covenant, the Old Testament of which Jesus speaks is the Law; the New Covenant, the New Testament is the Gospel. In the Letter to the Hebrew Christians, we read: ***"You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."*** Hebrews 12:23-24. Jesus fulfilled the Old Covenant, the entire Law of God. His blood saves us. He is the personification of the Gospel, because it is his perfect obedience which is imputed to us, which is chalked up to our account, by which we have eternal life.

This teacher of the law, who is not named, agreed with Jesus, and even elaborated on Jesus' comments. He agreed that loving God and loving the neighbor are more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices, most of which indicate repentance for sins against God's laws. He remembered these words from the Old Testament: ***"But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."*** 1 Samuel 15:22. And these words from Hosea: ***"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."*** Hosea 6:6. He remembered how easily ritual can take the place of love. His words are a reminder for us not to let our worship services become something that simply becomes an outward routine, something that simply goes in one ear and out the other, but that we are to put into practice what we hear.

The words of this teacher of the law also show he was drawn to Christ. Jesus was pleased with the man's answer, particularly when compared with the deafening silence that had so often greeted Jesus' statements. When Jesus now said to this man, ***"You are not far from the kingdom of God,"*** he let the man know that he had recognized the proper nature of the kingdom of God. Jesus' words were both a challenge and an invitation. He challenged him to take the next step and invited him to believe in Christ as his Savior. We don't know if the man ever took that step, but it may have happened. Jesus' words are powerful, for it is the living Word of God that he speaks.

So this is the final question directed to Jesus by his enemies before his death. By using the Scriptures Jesus always came out the winner. Yet in spite of that, they rejected him. Faith is not a matter of winning an argument, but a gift of God which, however, can be rejected in unbelief. May God keep us all in faith in his Son, and help us to follow his Law in loving Him and our fellow man. Amen.

