

The Christ, the Cross, and the Great Commandment

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: October 29, 2023

Readings

Exodus 22:21-27

Psalm 1

I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

Opening

Well, it is good to be back at Apostles after a few Sundays away. For those of you who didn't know, I've returned from a pilgrimage in Greece, visiting monasteries and holy sites in Thessaloniki and Mount Athos. It was a remarkable experience that I'm still digesting. But I'll say this—I'm glad to be worshiping the Lord in English today, not Greek.

I've been away for the better part of two weeks, but in the lectionary, we're still journeying through the same three days of Holy Week with our Lord Jesus. We began the month of October reading these events from Jesus' final week, where Jesus tells a series of parables to his opponents, the temple leaders, the Pharisees, and Sadducees. Last Sunday marked a shift in that exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees. From a series of stories, the Pharisees now ask pointed legal questions, trying to entangle Jesus in his words, a kind of religious entrapment so they can arrest and do away with him. First came the question about taxes and Caesar (last Sunday), and now the Pharisees question Jesus about the greatest commandment in the Torah, the Law of Moses.

Remember the time and place of these discussions. In Matthew's Gospel, we have a Holy Week timeline for these parables we've heard and the questions now posed to Jesus. These encounters occur in one or possibly two days, each conversation occurring within the Temple.

It's likely Monday of Holy Week, possibly Tuesday, when the Pharisees question Jesus about which commandment is the greatest. Our Lord faces this question in the Temple. He stands roughly five hundred feet or so from Golgotha. He receives this question 3 days before Good Friday.

Every Sunday we enter worship when a priest addresses us saying, "Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ said: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

I was once asked to address a group of students at a Christian high school, most of whom were Baptist, about Anglican liturgy. I was given 5 minutes. It's a good exercise—it forces you to the heart of things. The first thing I spoke about was hearing the Great Commandment at the beginning of worship every Sunday. I realized in that moment how I needed this Great Commandment because every week, every day, I fail in its high calling. The only fitting response to such a holy command—a command that requires my all—is Kyrie Eleison. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

When we become familiar with such a formative liturgy, we may not recognize the power of its first utterance. There are numerous ways one could explore Jesus' Great Commandment. Thank God we have this text appointed every year in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But today I want to focus on the fact that Jesus teaches the Great Commandment in the shadow of his cross. Christ teaches the golden rule early in his Sermon on the Mount: 'do unto others as they would have done unto you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.'¹He renounces Satan's temptation in the wilderness quoting Deuteronomy, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve.'²Now Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy, not in the wilderness or on the mountain teaching his disciples, but he elevates the greatest commandment in the shadow of the cross. The love of God, the love of neighbor—on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets. This is not a theological answer, a mere scriptural citation. All the Law and the Prophets hang on this Great Commandment. And the Great Commandment means that Jesus will hang from the cross.

The 'All' of the Commandments

That Jesus summarized the Law of Moses with these words was not a new revelation. Was this command not attached to the Shema of Israel in Deuteronomy 6? 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*'³Israel had lived with the command to love the Lord with *all* for nearly four millennia. And who had ever fulfilled that command? Not even Moses, the Lawgiver himself, fulfilled that calling. Not David, Israel's greatest king, the man after God's own heart, loved the Lord with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind. Not when he conspired to murder Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba; not when he committed adultery with Bathsheba. To quote the Apostle Paul, all had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God's greatest command—to love the Lord with *all*.

It's such a heavy word—'all'? Mind you, the Great Commandment to love the Lord our God does not contain one 'all,' but three. 'You shall love the Lord your God with *allyour* heart and with *allyour* soul and with *allyour* mind.' Who doesn't feel the weight of the 'all'? Who has never hesitated, never flinched, never shrank back in the face of the three great *alls*? Christ has said love the Lord your God all your heart, all your soul, all your mind. May we fear the attitude that diminishes this command into a corrupt variant, 'But I will love the Lord my God with some of my heart and with some of my soul and with some of my mind.' Kyrie eleison: Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy. Lord save.

C.S. Lewis expressed this totalizing call in his book *Mere Christianity*, imagining the Lord addressing any would-be disciple:

¹ Matthew 7.12

² Matthew 4.10

³ Deuteronomy 6.4-5

Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work. I want You. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you Myself: my own will shall become yours.⁴

And the only way God could give us his very self is if God made flesh gave his all—his flesh, his heart, his soul, his mind in total love to the Father, in total love for his neighbors and his enemies.

It might seem like a strange or even jarring transition in the conversation, when Jesus pivots from his answer about the Great Commandment to posing a question himself about the Christ. But the two belong together. 'What you think about the Christ?' Jesus asks the Pharisees, 'Whose son is he?' Their answer is biblical and theological. 'The son of David.' Jesus then reveals something greater, something hidden now revealed in the Scriptures. The Christ—the Messiah of Israel—is not only the one who will rescue Israel; he is more. Greater than Moses, greater than David. He is Lord. He is God—the I AM:

*How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls (the Christ) Lord, saying,
The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under feet?' If David calls him Lord, how is he his son?*

It is a riddle that hangs in the air. The Christ is greater than the one who will fulfill the royal covenant of David. He is destined for enthronement. He is the Lord. But the riddle of how the Christ is also the Lord—God himself—will only be solved by the riddle of the cross, when the Christ hangs in mid air.

The Cross Reveals the Greatest Commandment

Love of God and love for neighbor did not begin on the cross. No, as so many saints of the church have said, all his life Jesus bore the cross. Time forbids me to explore that further, so let us simply look a few days further from this Monday in Holy Week. It may not be Lent, but for a moment let us go to dark Gethsemane, for here is the place where we witness our Lord loving the Father, loving his neighbor with all his heart and soul and mind. Who has ever endured such mental and emotional agony to the point of sweating blood? God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God entered into the darkness of our mental suffering to redeem it, to love the Lord with all his mind. When we could not love the Lord with all our minds, our Lord Christ entered Gethsemane a great High Priest on our behalf. Broken in heart, soul, and mind, Christ yet prayed what we could not pray, he loved with a love that we could not offer saying, 'Not my will, but yours be done, O Lord.'

In one of the most remarkable sermons I've read, 'Mental Sufferings of our Lord in His Passion,' St John Henry Newman describes Christ entering Gethsemane as an arena,

walking forth into a mental agony with as definite an action, as if it were some bodily torture, the fire or the wheel.... As men of self-command can turn from one thought to another at their will, so much more did He deliberately deny Himself the comfort, and satiate Himself with the woe. In that moment His soul thought not of the future, He thought only of the present burden which was upon Him, and which He had

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.

come upon earth to sustain. My brethren, He has bled before His time; He has shed blood; yes, and it is His agonising soul which has broken up His framework of flesh and poured it forth. His passion has begun from within...⁵

Such is the love of one who fulfills the command to love the Lord his God with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind. Jesus Christ was not only Israel's Messiah, David's greatest son, he became sin who knew no sin, that we might become the righteousness of God.⁶ And what is the righteousness of God? To love God with all our heart, all our soul, all our mind. And to love our neighbor as ourself.

Conclusion

There is a rabbinical teaching that says one must not only fulfill the law as given, but must exceed the law as given. So we have heard rabbi Jesus speak in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees' to enter the Kingdom of heaven.⁷ Well, Christ himself exceeded the righteousness of the Great Commandment by the letter of the law. Yes, Christ loved his Father with *all*. Jesus said of his destiny in the Gospel of John, 'I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.' This was his passion—his suffering love—that *the world would know he loves the Father*.

And then recall the Upper Room. 'Greater love has no man than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.'⁸ And yet Christ has exceeded the command of his Father, when he died also for his enemies. It was a testimony that that former enemy, Saul become Paul, could offer when writing to the Romans. Remember, Paul said in his letter to the Romans, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.⁹ That is the riddle of the cross revealed. Only the cross of Jesus Christ fulfills the Great Commandment. Only the cross reveals that David's son was more than Israel's Messiah. From the mouth of a centurion and Roman soldiers, after Jesus breathed his last, it was pagan executioners who said, 'Truly this man was the Son of God!'¹⁰

The Christ, the Cross, the Great Commandment. Without these we cannot love God with anything, much less *all* our heart, *all* our soul, *all* our mind. We cannot love our neighbors as ourselves. We cannot love any adversary or enemy. But Christ has accomplished what we could not do. He has died, he is risen, he is ascended, and is seated at the Father's right hand. He has sent the Holy Spirit that we might love the Lord with all—not hesitating, not flinching, not fading. The same Spirit that kept Jesus nailed in love to his cross is the same Spirit that now tabernacles within your heart, your soul, your mind. We, too, must take up our cross to fulfill the Great Commandment to love God and love our neighbor. Suffering love, whether for God or one another, will be redeemed and glorified in Christ.

⁵ John Henry Newman, "Mental Sufferings of Our Lord in His Passion," in *John Henry Newman: Selected Sermons*, ed. Ian Ker and Bernard McGinn, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994), 390.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 5.21

⁷ Matthew 5.20

⁸ John 15.13

⁹ Romans 5.10

¹⁰ Matthew 27.54

Such it was and is for our Lord, such it will be for his saints, for he died that we might become his righteousness; and all for the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.