

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost; October 8, 2023  
+ Matthew 22:34-46 +  
“Watch Law and Gospel in Action”

**When they heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees met together. One of them who was an expert in the law asked him a question, trying to trap him. “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?”**

**Jesus said to him, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments.”**

**While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”**

**They said to him, “The Son of David.”**

**He said to them, “Then how can David in the Spirit call him Lord, saying,**

**The Lord said to my Lord,  
‘Sit at my right hand,  
until I put your enemies  
under your feet?’”**

**“So if David calls him Lord, how is he his son?”**

**No one was able to answer him a word, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.**

*This sermon borrows heavily from one preached by Pastor Bryan Wolfmueller at Hope Lutheran Church in Aurora, Colorado in 2016.*

Today’s Gospel lays out in front of us the two great doctrines of the Christian faith: the law and the gospel. It does it with two trap questions. The first trap question is asked to Jesus, and so it fails. The second trap questions is asked by Jesus, and so it succeeds.

The occasion is this: It is Tuesday of Holy Week, three days before the crucifixion, and Jesus is in Jerusalem teaching in the temple. This is the last time Jesus will teach or preach in public until he preaches seven very short but sweet sermons from the cross.

The Sadducees and the Pharisees have been plotting to arrest Jesus, but they can’t catch Him. They are still trying. First the Pharisees asked him about taxes, and if they should pay taxes to Caesar. (They did this to trap Jesus, too. They thought that no matter how he answered they could have him arrested or

rejected.) Then the Sadducees asked about the woman whose husband died, and she was remarried, and this happened seven times, and they wanted to know whose wife she would be in the resurrection. (This question was also meant to trap Jesus; they asked this because they didn't believe in the resurrection and were trying to prove the impossibility of it.) Jesus has answered both of their objections truthfully and untrapped, but they are unwilling to say "uncle."

So the Gospel for today begins with a question of the Law, asked to Jesus by these enemies of his, still trying to trap him.

A lawyer from the Pharisees comes up to Jesus, and asks, **"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"**

This is any easy question for us to answer. We teach the children the first commandment all the time: You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. The Pharisees should have known this, but they had two theological problems.

First, they had been busy, for centuries, piling on their own man-made laws. They had expanded the Ten Commandments and the laws given through Moses to include all sorts of instructions to keep themselves set apart from the rest of humanity. The second problem was that they set different parts of the law against each other, especially this: they separated love for God from love for the neighbor.

In their attempts to be holy and pure with God, they had pushed their neighbor aside.

We see this is a number of ways through the Gospels. Remember how offended the Pharisees were when Jesus sat and ate with sinners? That is because they would never do such a thing; they kept the sinners and the unclean at a distance so that the Pharisees would remain pure. Remember the Priest and Levite that Jesus talked about in the story of Good Samaritan? They walked on the other side of the street so that they wouldn't come into contact with the dying man, because then they would become unclean for their service at the temple. In the very next chapter of Matthew Jesus preaches a fierce sermon against the Pharisees and Sadducees, denouncing their hypocrisy of separating love of God from love of neighbor.

They were misusing the Law to exalt themselves and to destroy others. They used their "love for God" and great holiness as an excuse to despise their neighbor. They used their service in the temple as an excuse to neglect their parents and their neighbors.

Which is why Jesus' answer to the question, "Which is the greatest commandment?" is so wonderful:

**Jesus said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets depend on these commandments."**

You have the first three Commandments, which say, “Love God,” and you have the last seven, “Love your neighbor,” and these are the unified law of God. It’s not one or the other. It’s both at the same time, all the time. **“The second,”** Jesus says, **“is like it.”** After all, who created your neighbor? Who lowered himself and came as a human to save your neighbor? Who declares that his loving heart wants all people to be saved by coming to faith in his Son? Love for neighbor is love for God, too. Love for God is love for neighbor, too.

There is enough here for us to meditate on for our whole lives. I’d like you to think of this one thing in particular: when Jesus says that the command to love our neighbor is like the command to love God, he is convicting us of sin. We too sometimes think of love for God and for others as two separated things. We come to church to show love for God, but then pay attention to the other people there. Or we give generously to charity and lightly to the offering plate. We say prayers to God but unkind things to our neighbor, or work hard for our boss without giving God a thought. It’s not one or the other, but sometimes we go down that road, too. The law of God condemns us, too.

For the forgiven children of God, this law also gives us a fantastic gift. The Son of God is saying, “When you love and serve and help your neighbor, you love and serve and help me, too!” In Matthew 25 Jesus is talking about the Day of Judgment. To the sheep, those blessed with salvation, he will say: **“For I was hungry and you gave me food to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was lacking clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you took care of me.”**

So imagine, for a moment, that we heard news that Jesus was going to come down from his throne for a quick visit. He would come to church, stay for refreshments (maybe even enjoy Folgers for the very first time), and then come for lunch at your house. Think of what a privilege that would be, how you would get everything ready, how you would spare no expense and no effort to demonstrate your love for him. You would consider it the highest privilege of your lives to welcome Jesus and sit with Jesus and feed Jesus and speak kindly to Jesus.

Well, says Jesus, I give you that opportunity with every one of your neighbors. Children, when you honor your father and your mother, you are giving your service to God. Parents, when you care physically and spiritually for your children, you are blessing Jesus. Friends, when you take care of your friends, when you bless your neighbor, when you help those in need, you are serving and loving God. “The second is like the first,” says Jesus.

So we don’t have to invent our own forms of holiness; we don’t have to run away from our neighbors to stay pure; we don’t have to spend a lot of money to find a way to serve God; these opportunities are always right in front of us. And for that we give thanks to God.

But this command to love God and our neighbor is the Law, and it will always accuse us of sin. We never love as we should. In fact, the more we try to love our neighbor the more we see how fear and laziness cling to us. That is true: the better you know God’s commandments and the harder you try to keep them, the more aware of your sin you become, the more damning failure you notice. We are afraid to give and be generous because we might not have enough left over. And so often we don’t want to do good because, well, we just don’t want to; we’d rather sit around. The Lord Jesus stands in front of you

in each of your neighbors, giving you the opportunity to serve and bless Him. And we have failed to do it perfectly as God demands.

The preaching of law always accuses of sin, and demands repentance. And the first part of repentance is awareness of sin and sorrow for it.

But Jesus isn't through with us. In fact, he's not even through with the Pharisees on that Holy Tuesday. After he answers all their questions, he puts a trap question to them. And it works, because the truth of Scriptures is squarely on his side. The unbelieving heart gets caught in Jesus' question; the believing heart is struck with joy at the answer to his question. The Pharisees could not answer it, but that we can.

We want to look at this carefully, step by step. It's verses 41-46 in the Gospel, and reading along as you listen may help:

**While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David."**

That's the set up, and their answer is right so far. The Messiah, the Christ, was promised be the Son of Adam, the Son of Noah, the Son of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Judah. But the most recent promise was to King David, that his Son would sit on the throne eternally. So they are right that the Christ would be the Son of David.

Now the riddle. Jesus quotes Psalm 110, a Psalm of David. **He said to them, "Then how can David in the Spirit call him Lord, saying,**

**The Lord said to my Lord,  
'Sit at my right hand,  
until I put your enemies  
under your feet?'"**

**"So if David calls him Lord, how is he his son?"**

Let's see if we can sort this out. The key phrase is the first one, "The Lord said to my Lord." The first Lord is God the Father. The "my" is King David. The Second "Lord" is the Messiah, and he must also be God, because who else would a king like David call "Lord," other than God himself? Jesus is drawing the conclusion that the promised Messiah must be both David's son – a human being – and David's Lord – God. Which is exactly who Jesus says he himself is!

The Old Testament – here and in many other places – promises a Messiah who is both human and God. But the Pharisees thought he'd only be a great human. So here's the Pharisees' response: **No one was able to answer him a word, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.**

It is an amazing thing that the Pharisees, who were experts in the Law, couldn't even sort out what the greatest commandment is. They don't have a chance when it comes to the second great teaching of the Bible: the gospel, the good news of who Christ is and his work of us.

How can the Christ be both David's Son and David's Lord? As we confess in the Creeds, he is true God, begotten of the Father from all eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary. He is David's Son according to his human nature, and David's Lord according to his divine nature. You see it, by God's grace. He has given you more wisdom than the Pharisees.

And there is more. The words of David's Psalm not only teach the great mystery of who the Christ is, it also teaches his work. **"Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet."** What are these enemies? Sin, death, and the devil. These enemies are our enemies. I suppose the devil is God's enemy too, but what can the devil do to God? Sin and death cannot touch God. They destroy and devour us. But look, when God's Son becomes our human brother, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, he now battles the same enemies that we do. Our enemies become his! Suddenly, the devil can reach him in the wilderness. Sin, all sin, stacks on his shoulders on the cross and he suffers hell for it all. And death finally reaches him, too. On the cross Jesus is bearing our sin, dying our death, being struck by the devil in our place. Jesus becomes one of us to make our enemies his enemies. And he defeats them all for us! They are now under his feet, a picture of abject defeat and embarrassment. Our enemy sin is snuffed out under Jesus' feet. Our enemy the devil's head is crushed under Christ's feet. Jesus stands in victory over our enemy death. He killed death for us on Easter.

This is the teaching of the gospel, the good news that David's Son and David's Lord, the Messiah who is God and man, has suffered our sin, died our death, and risen for us, to forgive our sins and rescue us from sin and the devil and death. He has done it. Where our works and our love fell short and we stood condemned, Jesus took the condemnation for us, and demonstrates his love, his perfect and complete love, by suffering and dying for us. This gospel is our comfort and confidence and joy.

For all those God has called to faith, this teaching of the gospel also completes our repentance. The law showed us our sin and made us sorry. The gospel shows us God's love in Christ and makes his forgiven children.

So these thirteen verses are a wonderful case study in how all of God's Word works. The law works to convict us of our sin. The gospel shows us God's salvation in Christ. These two teachings lead hearts to true repentance: the law produces sorrow for sin and the gospel gives confidence that sin is forgiven in Christ. For that repentant Christian, the law then shows the way to please our loving God and how to thank him. In this case, the law guides us to see Jesus in the eyes of every neighbor we meet, and to treat them accordingly. And the gospel makes us eager to do it. What else could we do for the One who faced our enemies and conquered them for us?

May the Holy Spirit keep us in these two great teachings and with them lead us to life eternal. Amen.