

Matthew 22.34-46  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity  
3 October 2021  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

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Beloved in the Lord: grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

The basis for today's sermon is the Gospel lesson, and especially these words of Jesus, "The whole of the law hangs on these two commandments, and the prophets."

*Oremus: haec, pater sancte, verba tua sunt, etc.*

If only you could see the scene from the Gospel in all its glory! It's so glorious that it almost blows the mind:

For the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; and we have seen His glory.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." That Word has become flesh.

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That Word has become flesh.

That Word has become flesh—David's Son—and in His flesh He perfectly, completely, with all His heart, with all His soul, with all His mind, fulfills the Word He laid down. Fulfills *Himself*, as it were, remaining obedient to the Father in heaven unto death, even the death of the Cross.

He has become flesh and in His flesh He perfectly, completely, loved His own to the end, bearing what you cannot bear—your sins—suffering what you cannot suffer—the punishment for sin—and conquering what you cannot conquer—death and even hell itself. He loved you, doing for you what you would have done unto you, but would not do unto Him.

That's the glory of this scene: the beauty of the full intention of God for the crown of His creation, the sum of the 10 Commandments, incarnate *in Jesus* in all its glory.

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You know, you've heard the saying: the only people who go into teaching are the ones who can't do it themselves.

I'm pretty sure I disagree with that.

But it does harbor a kernel of truth. And the truth is this. It's one thing to know what a finished product looks like, and an entirely different thing to get from the raw material to the finished product. I know what a well-made curtain ought to look like, but darn if I can turn a bolt of cloth into one. It's one thing to say, "This is how things *ought* to be, and an entirely different thing to make things the way they ought to be." I know how my car ought to feel going down the road, but doggone if it's impossible for me to balance and align my own tires. It's one thing to state goals, and an entirely different thing to be able to and to know how to get from here to the end.

I think that's what that saying is getting at: the only people who go into teaching are the ones who can't do it themselves.

But even more dangerous is this: attempting to achieve something in ignorance or negligence of the way to achieve it—maybe even in willful ignorance or negligence. Using a sledgehammer on my right rear wheel to take the wobble out of it. Not a good idea. Using a box-cutter and some nails as pins to make a curtain out of cloth. Bad idea. You know this. This is common sense. We'll come back to that danger in a minute.

But for now, let's focus on the first thing: that it's only those who can't do the job who teach it. That it's one thing to be able to say what a thing ought to look like, and an entirely different thing to get there.

That was exactly the problem of the Pharisees. When the one—who's called a lawyer in the Gospel—asked Jesus what was the great commandment in the Law, he knew the answer. He knew that Five Books of Moses could be summed up in just one sentence, "You will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." He didn't need Jesus to tell him what the answer was. Because he had taught it his whole life. When Jesus gave him the gratuitous second response, as if He knew exactly what the lawyer's follow-up question was going to be—"Okay, so if you know the first and greatest, what's second in rank and like the first?"—when Jesus gave him that gratuitous second answer, "You will love your neighbor as yourself," once again, the lawyer didn't need the instruction. He knew it. He had ordered his entire life, or so it seemed, around those two things. Those were the goal. Love God, love neighbor, and you've got it made. That's what Moses preached. That's what the prophets preached. Love.

But make no mistake. He was just like those who go into teaching because they can't do. Just like those who know what a thing ought to look like, but without a clue how to get there. He could say it all till he was blue in the face, but it wouldn't change a thing. It didn't happen by repeating it.

And that's because of the way he looked at the problem. You see, his heart—it wasn't so bad. His soul, not too bad, either. Same with his mind. Or at least not so bad that his daily life couldn't have some semblance of holiness.

When his neighbor's wife, beautiful Rachel down the street, swished by on her way to the market, sure, it stirred something in him. But he still went to bed with his own wife that night.

When his brother and his family came over for dinner it was always in their latest fancy car. They'd park it right next to his old piece of junk. Inevitably conversation got around to their early retirement plans so they'd have more time to split between their "cabin" in Montana and their condo in Florida. The green monster always started battling inside him. But he'd always managed—managed to put on a smile and say how happy he was for them.

And when he lay in bed on those nights comparing the mystery of how his and his brother's lives could have gone on such different trajectories, he impoverished by his education in the Law and Talmud, his brother the lucky Joe who'd been a screw-up in school but had, as they say, "the gift of gab" that had gotten him where he was—well, he didn't blame his God for it. Or at least not enough that he didn't get up the next morning and go to synagogue.

And all the while he developed a set of euphemisms. Coping mechanisms, really. He knew that when his neighbor Rachel caught his attention that something was wrong. But he called it "appreciating God's creation." He knew that covetousness was a motion of the heart. But he asked himself what was wrong with wanting what's best for your family. He knew that godliness with contentment was great gain. And for this one he had two coping mechanisms: he liked to emphasize godliness over contentment by practicing the strictest piety. And he masked his despair of God's earthly blessings, his lack of trust in God's provision, by extolling his own frugality.

That was the lawyer.

And I bet—I bet you a million dollars—you know someone exactly like that. Don't you?

Problem was this way of living put the lawyer on a roller coaster. One day he was high on life and himself. The next he was down in his cups. One day he'd managed to play the charade really well—so well that others even noticed, probably even God Himself. The next day even the best-played charade couldn't really mask what was going on in his heart. And he was certain God knew it all. Because He did.

That was his problem, really. That's how it manifested itself in his inner life.

But his deeper problem was that he lived in utter ignorance and negligence of how to achieve the holiness of the Law—maybe even willful ignorance and negligence. Actually, I suspect it was willful.

Because what achieving such holiness required was his death. And he wasn't going to do that. There was maybe an easier way. It was the whole charade business. And he'd perfected the charade business. There were these things you could do, and he'd started learning them from before he could even remember. He'd been conscientiously raised by good parents who instilled good habits. If you just followed them, they seemed to get the job done. He'd dug deep within himself, overcoming his will to act a certain way defaulting to those good habits. And he'd developed this trick: you could play one reel in your head and live another in your body. The ancient version of virtual reality. With the reel running in the background he found he could actually do those 618 or however many laws there were that, if you just did them, so the line went, you also loved God with your whole heart and your neighbor as yourself. That he could handle.

But who was he kidding? It wasn't really love for God. It wasn't really love for neighbor. It was a pro forma thing. It was of the letter, not of the Spirit. It was the public projection of himself, his public persona, not the heart. Try as he might when the lips said one thing, the mind still read from a different script.

If this life were to be done with, if love for God with heart, soul, and mind—all of them, and the entirety of them—were to become the lived reality of this lawyer. If his lust after Rachel were ever to turn to true, 6<sup>th</sup>-Commandment-embodiment love. If his love for his own flesh-and-blood brother were ever to be more than an instrument for securing an invite to the "cabin" in Montana. If that were to happen, well, he'd come to realize it. It would be the end of "him." Death of self. Death to his sin. Death to all the crap he felt and did and said when sinned against. He'd have to die.

Actually, not just "die." Be put to death.

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And yet, there is One who can live this life without first dying: Jesus Christ. David's Son and the Son of God.

If all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments to love, those two commandments to love in turn hang on, point to, propound, and teach us who Jesus Christ is. It's not that they form Him, but that He forms them. It's not that what to love means and is comes first and Jesus fits in later. It's that love is defined out of Jesus. For He is created not in the image of God, like Adam. Much less in the fallen image of God, like you. He *is* the image of God. And God is love. The two commandments to love only weakly and in words depict what it is to be Jesus—one who loves God with all His heart, all his soul, all his mind, and His neighbor as Himself.

But get this: for all his reading and studying and knowledge the lawyer had missed this. For all their reading and studying and knowledge of Moses' books and all the prophets, the Pharisees had missed this. The love commanded and demanded by God in His law, the love that the entire law and all the prophets hang on, the love which must be fulfilled—this love is made real, is known, is seen, is enacted, is brought to fruition alone in the Christ, who must be the Son of God and not David's Son alone, so that God must make even His law, that tortuous thing that to hear it is to be condemned by it—God must make even His law point to the Gospel of His Son.

This is how horrifically fallen the human condition. No son of David—a man after God's own heart, whose sons you'd think would be cut out of the same mold (the Pharisees certainly thought so!)—could even fulfill it. Which isn't to say that the Christ must not be David's Son. He must. He must fulfill the law in human flesh and be perfectly a man after God's own heart. But to do so He must also be God's Son. In other words, there's no cajoling, no prodding, no hitting upside the head with a 2x4; there's no coaxing, no needling, no nagging; there's no nudging, no shouting, no jumping up and down that will move a heart and a soul and a mind wrapped up in its own evil to become good. Not for David. Not for a son of David. And certainly not for a lawyer. Or a Pharisee. Or even you. The good that must be done, the love that characterizes the law, can't emerge from me. It has to come from somewhere else. That's where the good is. Not in you. Outside of you. In Christ, the Son of God and David's Son.

That's where the good is.

But then what of the evil?

It must be put to death. That good might come, evil must be entirely vanquished.

And you can't do that either. You can't load up all your wickedness and evil deeds and carry them off. You can't because you don't *want* to. Christ can. You can't take that load of evil and filth and be glad—overjoyed!—to be done with them. Because you don't *will* it, actually. Christ can. You can't obediently nail them with yourself to a cross and kill not only them but yourself, who are their source. You don't want that either. But Christ can. Much less can you, having been put to death for sin, rise again from the dead, leaving what you love in the grave, your own sins. That's also not what you want. The wages of sin is death, and dead is dead. But Christ can.

And Christ did. All of it. For you. To say that Christ died for you is to say that He died in your place. You should have died. You didn't. But He did.

Look at the holy cross for a sec. The death He died there isn't His death. It's yours. That's the horror of your sin. That's what it cost to be rid of all sins and wickedness. That's what it cost to be done once for all with a heart and soul and mind and will hell-bent on evil.

And all of this He made over to you sacramentally, mysteriously. "You were buried therefore with Him through Baptism into death," says St. Paul. A watery crucifixion. "The death He died He died to sin," St. Paul says. For a baptized believer to gaze upon the cross of Jesus is to see his own death. It's to say not just, "That's what I deserve," but to say, "There I died. With Christ." "So that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life," St. Paul says. His resurrection your resurrection—and not just down the road on the last day. But already.

You see? That's the glory of this scene. The entire incarnate fulfillment of the Law presented to the eyes of the lawyer. Of the Pharisees. To *your* eyes.

That's what faith clings to. No more riding the desperation roller coaster. No more camouflaging the wickedness of your heart. For it's all gone. Dead and gone. Buried with Christ.

And now new motions stir. For you have died and your life is hidden with God in Christ. The stirrings of the authentic love for God, the stirrings of authentic love for neighbor—they're already there. Him you love because He first loved you; your neighbor you love because as much as you're in Christ, Christ is in you, and the life you live you live for Christ.

And I bet you a million dollars you know someone like that, too.

Amen.

*pax dei, etc.*

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