

October 29, 2023

Texts: Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18; Matthew 22:34-40

Title: "A Not so Difficult Question"

If you've ever sat through a job interview you know what it's like to hold your breath as you wait for that next question. Will it be something that you can't possibly answer or maybe it will be a good question but your mind will go blank when it's asked.

A young woman was interviewing for admission into a top business school. The professor began the interview. "We can ask you ten easy questions or one really difficult one," he said. "What will it be?" The woman thought for a moment. "I would like to answer one really difficult question." The professor scowled. "Okay, if that's your choice," he said. "Which comes first, day or night?" The seconds ticked by while the woman pondered her answer. Then she looked up with a smile, "The day comes first." "And why would you say that?" the professor asked. "Sorry, sir," she said, "but you assured me that I wouldn't need to answer the second difficult question."

Our Bible passage has one of the religious leaders asking Jesus a tough question, not because they were searching for real answers, but because they wanted to make him look bad to decrease his popularity with the people.

The question is "...which commandment in the law is the greatest?" This is a great question to try to stump him because no matter what he answers, he's going to neglect some aspect of the law and then the religious leaders can pounce on him for

his ignorance of the Law. But Jesus didn't take the bait. Instead, he took them all the way back to the very foundation of God's laws, to the One Big Law that's the basis for everything else. And then he adds a second one to it.

So its all about love...our love for God with all that we have. And it's experienced through love for one's neighbor as themselves. The Pharisees had a love for the law itself, elevating it above both love for God and neighbor.

**Love for God and love for one's neighbor has to come before everything else or the Law has no purpose.** If we don't have love as the defining purpose behind all we do, we miss the spirit of the law and the purpose of our faith altogether.

I read recently about a man from Ireland who became an Internet sensation for a silly mistake he made while vacationing in Las Vegas. He borrowed his son's GoPro camera, put it on a stick, and walked all over the Las Vegas Strip, filming and narrating everything. When he got home, he uploaded his videos to YouTube without previewing it (which was a mistake) and discovered later that instead of filming the lights and sounds of the Las Vegas Strip, he filmed close-ups of his own face the whole time. At the present time over 10 million people viewed the man's failed attempt at doing a vacation video.

**The religious leaders of Jesus' day were like that guy: they were pointing their attention in the wrong direction.** Jesus was saying here, "If you knew God, you wouldn't have to ask about the greatest commandment." The intention of the law was to point us to the truth of a Loving God. But if we fall in love with the rules or let's

say, the “culture of the faith” but not the Lord, we miss out on the whole point of it. When you have the trappings of the faith without love, it becomes legalistic and judgmental. My mission in life is to “learn how to love.”

In the late 1970s, Pastor Joe McKeever was pastor at a church in Mississippi. One Sunday a deacon told him of a conversation that he had that day with a visitor to the church who came up to him and “Your pastor is going to hell.” The deacon said, “May I ask why?” The visitor said, “His hair is too long.”

Remember this was the 1970s. That’s the way some people thought back then, that there was something evil about a man with long hair. So the elder asked a question: “And how long should his hair be?” The man answered, “About like mine.”

That’s an example of someone placing the norms of the culture ahead of love for God. The visitor was of the opinion that a person’s hair length makes you unacceptable to God. Of course, what made this particular encounter doubly absurd was that most religious art back in the 70s showed Jesus with long hair.

**To the extent that we love God wholeheartedly, our lives will align with God’s character and will.** Seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Jeremiah promised the people of Israel that someday God would make a new covenant with them. God would put His law into their minds and write it on their hearts (Jer. 31:33). That’s what happens when we love God wholeheartedly. Our prioritizing of love for God compels us to live in a way that honor God and honors Love itself.

**The best way to show our love for God, of course, is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.** Think about it. It's fairly easy to fake our love for God. What I mean is we can wear certain clothing or speak in a way that indicates that we are Christian. We can even attend worship and use that as convincing evidence of our love for God.

But loving your neighbor as yourself—you can't fake that for long. It requires seeing your neighbor as made in the image of God. It requires self-sacrifice. If we love God, then we will love those who are made in God's image. And our genuine love for our neighbors will cause them to experience the presence of God.

If we have "love" for others, it doesn't mean we don't speak hard truths or even confront people sometimes. But...it does mean that we do it with an attitude of respect and humility. In our public discourse today, more than ever as best I can see, we are seriously lacking sharing our opinions within the theme of Christian love, are we not. We all get caught up in this. It's important to realize that our love for God, love for neighbor-based faith must underlie everything we do or we've got work to do, don't we, all of us! We've got to have love first...in our hearts or we're just, as Paul put it, a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. Amen.