

Pentecost 22; October 29/30, 2023

Matthew 22:34-46

There was a pastor who started his sermon by placing a worm in four separate jars. The first worm was put into a container of alcohol. The second worm was put into a container of cigarette smoke. The third worm was placed in a jar of chocolate syrup. The fourth worm was placed into a jar of good clean soil. By the time he got to the end of his sermon, the pastor reported the following results for the worm in each of the four jars:

- The first worm in alcohol Dead .
- The second worm in cigarette smoke . . . Dead .
- Third worm in chocolate syrup Dead.
- Fourth worm in good clean soil Alive

So, he asked the congregation, *“what did we learn from this demonstration?”* A woman sitting in the back quickly raised her hand and said . . . *“As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won’t have worms!”* Obviously, she missed the whole point of the demonstration.

I think it is part of human nature to often miss the point in life and not see the big picture in life. There is an old phrase that often is used to describe that point. Do we sometimes *“not see the forest for the trees?”* Sometimes we are not able to appreciate the whole forest, because we are too close or too focused on the individual trees. When we do that, we become so focused on the trivial matters, that we waste a lot of time and energy on the important matters. Ever done that? I have to admit that I do that more often than I want to admit.

That’s what the Pharisees in our text had done with God’s law. The Pharisees liked laws. They worked out in detail what was right and wrong in almost any given situation. So, instead of 10 commandments, they had 613 commandments to follow. They thought that the true religion was about following the laws that they had set up. And they thought some laws were more important than others. So, it is not surprising that they asked an expert in the law to go to Jesus and ask him which of the 613 commandments were most important. **“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”** While the scribe might have genuinely wondered which of the commandments was the greatest, this whole scenario was to attack Jesus. They knew that however he would answer, there were going to be people who would not agree with him. As much as they say that they are all equal commands, they knew that people would rank sins as being worse or not. We sometimes think like that too. We ask ourselves, which is the worst sin? We might figure that murder is worse than stealing, and stealing is worse than lying. We like to divide the law of God up in to important and not as important. We think of sins as being a big sin or little sin just like them.

But Jesus wasn’t going to fall into their trap. He needed to take the conversation away from each sin and move it into the reasons behind each of the commandments. They were not seeing the forest for the trees. They just didn’t see the big picture anymore. They waited for an answer from Jesus, but he didn’t say that even one of the Ten Commandments were more important than another. Instead, Jesus said: **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”**

What does Jesus do? He answers the scribe and the Pharisees with Scripture itself. He goes back to the books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. **“4 Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”** (Deut. 6:4-5) In fact the Jews would take these words, write them on little pieces of paper, and put them in little pouches that they would tie on their foreheads. This was the whole purpose of the laws that God had given them centuries before. As they would place God first in their lives, the second command would follow, as recorded in Leviticus: **“18 Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.”** (Lev. 19:18) When God gave Moses his commandments to his people, he already had given the motive behind the commandments. Love.

“I can do it myself!” How many times do we hear those words from our children? When you might step in to give them a hand, they push you away and say: *“I can do it myself!”* How many men have struggled to put something together? Their wives may even ask them if they need some help. Then out come the words: *“I can do it myself.”* When they can’t get it, they have to either go back to the instructions or find a YouTube video to find help. Honestly, we all do it. It really doesn’t

matter the gender or the age of someone. We look at the commands of God and we think that we *can do it myself*. That's what the Pharisees had been doing with their 613 commands. *Look God, I can do it myself*.

Maybe that's what God has been trying to get us to see with this whole section of the book of Matthew that we have been looking at in the last number of weeks. We saw Jesus give the same wage to all who had worked in his vineyard. He wants us to change our thinking when it comes to fairness in the kingdom of God. God wants us to see that we do not get ready for the wedding banquet by what we do, but by what God has done for us. We see how much God loves us when he even sends us own Son to die from our sins. Remember all these accounts are happening on Tuesday of Holy Week. He knows that he is going to die in only a few short days. Yet, he wants people, even the Pharisees, to see the love of God. As much as we can think that we can keep God's laws by ourselves, we can't. But Jesus can and did. Since we are saved by what Jesus did, it changes the entire focus of the law. Instead of keeping it to get to heaven, it now is there to give us to show a way that we love God and our neighbors.

Since we fail to keep the two greatest commandments, we needed a Savior who could. Israel was looking for a Messiah to restore earthly glory to David's kingdom. But what mankind needed was a Messiah who could restore us to fellowship with God. **"He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?"** How could David call his son Lord? Because the Son of David was the Son of God who came to do what we could not.

That's what Jesus wanted the Pharisees to see. That's what Jesus wants us to see. He wants us to see the forest the for the trees. Don't get lost in the details, that you miss the whole forest. The main thing is Jesus and his love for us. May God help us to keep our eyes focused on his love so that we can reflect his love to those around us. May God grant it. Amen.