

## Sermon: All You Need is Love

Let my mouth's utterances be pleasing  
And my heart's stirring before You,  
LORD, my rock and redeemer.

(Psalm 19:15. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. Robert Alter, 2019.)

Love is the Word on which hang all the Law and the Prophets.

Love, not power;

Love, not heritage;

Love, not Law;

Love, not worship preferences;

Love, not views on racial identity;

Love, not this ... nor that...;

LOVE, LOVE, LOVE, LOVE, LOVE!!!!!!!

Can you feel the tension rising? Has there been a slight shift from your listening head, to your beating heart, and maybe even to your wringing hands? Are you starting to wonder where on earth this message might be going? Part of me wants to say, "here endeth the Message", and leave it there. But I won't.

In reading this passage, we don't necessarily experience the tension, that has been growing between the leaders of Jesus' own traditional community and Jesus himself; but tension is building. Matthew is making sure of that. He presents these interactions like there's a fight going on and, in the end, there will be a clear winner.

So, let's look back a bit. Earlier, Jesus' authority to teach has been challenged, so, he teaches wisely about the Kingdom of God (21:23-27), he teaches openly about the rejection of God's heirs (21:28-45), he teaches faithfully about God's hospitality and subsequent faithful response (22:1-14). The crowds are growing, and many are in awe of this teaching. They see a prophet who seems to be opening the doors of this Godly Kingdom; maybe they will be included. Sensing the growing support for this usurper, Jesus, the troubled religious leaders gather wider support from political influencers.

The Herodians are brought in. They share in the challenge to Jesus' political views (22:15-22). Amazed at Jesus ability to hold tension between faith and politics with astute honour, the Herodians leave. Then the Pharisees seem to take a step back and maybe watch the back-up team have a go. The Sadducees step up (22:23-33), offering Jesus a trap centred on the minutia of written authority and the associated tradition; they suggest the answer to their question lies in either honouring Moses (Deut. 25:5-10) or affirming the sanctity of one brother's marriage over another. Jesus rejects the very categories they offer as wrong. It is not a question of scripture or tradition or even faith, it is a question about the very presence of God. For this Son, his Father, God, is not captured and contained within the teachings of

the past; scripture and tradition and community are gifts for growing relationship with God; gifts for the present.

Can you feel it? The Herodians have gone. The Sadducees have been silenced; they're out of the fight too. The Pharisees turn to one of their best; seeking a win they give it one more go. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" With 613 to choose from the potential for failure is great. For many, at that time, it was believed that all laws should be upheld with rigor and that choosing one over another would open oneself up to serious critical debate. Jesus response is triumphant.

In Mark's gospel (Mk 12:28-31), Jesus offers two commandments. First love God, and second love neighbour as self. Matthew however binds the two as equal partners. The Shema, the primary confession of the Israelites (Deut. 6:5) "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" is bound to "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19:18). Matthew ensures these two aspects of faithful love are inseparable. Jesus has won the debate; his central teaching has been hammered home (7:12; 22:34-40).

If we read on and see Jesus the Victor, turn to his failed challengers with a rather tough and seemingly unanswerable retort, much like the ones they had given him, I'm reminded that Jesus does not teach his followers to be 'nice', he teaches them to be faithfully loving. That can mean that in following Him, we too sometimes have to be tough, with love of course. Read through the woes Jesus proclaims throughout Matthew chapter 23; you'll get a sense of what he's doing.

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The tension reminds us that this teaching is scandalous; Jesus has already made it clear that this love of neighbour includes enemies (Matt 5: 43-45). Jesus has already been marked for the cross (Matt 12:14). Now he has identified himself as a traitor to every form of nationalism and every form of imperialism. Following this, 'knowing Jesus' in this, means we too are called to faithfully stand up against every 'ism' that separates us from the neighbour who is 'other'. Following this, 'making Jesus known', is to see every other persons' life as valued as highly as our own life.

It's so easy to say that we love God and we love neighbour. In truth, it's never that easy to do. Well it's not easy for me anyway. Maybe you've got it all worked out. But when I meditate on the explicit love of the commands of Leviticus 19: 1-18 I know there is plenty of room for improvement. Theologian Warren Carter expresses the love in this command well:

*“The command presents not just an exhortation to occasional loving acts but a **societal vision**. Leviticus 19 requires just human relations, including respect for parents (Lev 19:3), provision of food for the poor and alien (19:9-10), no stealing, lying, false dealing or swearing falsely by God’s name (Lev 19:11-12), no defrauding or reviling of the deaf and blind (19:13-14), no biased judgements or slander (19:15-16), no hatred or vengeance (19:17-18).”*

The societal vision is grand. Jesus persistence in expressing that vision through deeply faithful relationship, with God and with neighbour and with self, to the point of death on a cross, is awe inspiring. So much so that I really had to work hard to try to understand what Jesus is doing when as victor he seems to turn on the pharisees with his own version of an ‘impossible question’. If David calls the Messiah Lord, how can the Messiah also be David’s son?

If Jesus values the Pharisees as highly as he values himself, how can he be trying to trap them? I’m sure there are more possibilities to understanding this passage than this, but here’s two. Well maybe it’s two aspects of the same one. Anyway firstly, we might interpret Jesus’ question as an opportunity rather than a trap. The ‘BibleProject’ team has recently shared a video on this (<https://youtu.be/sR4ATOLMJ5c>). They say that, biblically, the difference between opportunities and traps is whether the person giving the test has your best interests in mind or not. I like that vision of God as opportunity giver. So, I’m thinking Jesus’ might be giving all those who hear, including the opposing Pharisees, the opportunity to understand that ‘impossible questions’ can be opportunities to be transformed.

The second possibility, or furthering the first, Jesus is putting forward a highly respected and accepted understanding of the Messiah as the son of David (Isa. 11:1,10; Jer. 23:5; Matt 1.1). Matthew’s Jesus is also asserting that this Son Messiah, is greater than David (Ps. 110:1; Matt 12:6,41). This notion of a son being greater than a father, would be inconceivable in Second Temple Judaism. It challenges tradition and it argues one scripture against another scripture. If Jesus wasn’t already prepped for the cross, he sure is now.

What could be this important to Jesus? Is his intent to liberate and transform the naysayers till his dying breathe? It would seem so. All I can conclude is that the invitations and promises Jesus offers of a new way of kingdom life, where hatred and pride can be left behind and loving relationship, in Christ, with the Father, are first and foremost. Here is love, One who is prepared to offer every possible chance for repentance and renewal.

Friends, I don’t have all the answers and often I find the questions downright discombobulating. What I am sure of, is that we have a call to follow. The following of Jesus asks much of us. It is the challenge of choosing life in relationship with God, even if that choice leads to some form of death. Death of us knowing all the right answers, maybe. Death to our desire to overpower others with our understanding of scripture and tradition, maybe.

The following of Jesus also blesses us, greatly; through communion with Christ and with one another, we embody the resurrection life that says to the world 'Life overcomes death, Christ is Victor.'

Jesus says, 'Love'. Jesus lives and dies, Love. We are loved by a God who never gives up on us, a steadfast God, who is Love.

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Father God, Messiah Son, Spirit of Transforming Love, we trust that you will bring life from death, in this your people of the resurrection. Amen.

Rev Dr. Kerry Pierce

(You may register your thanks to the worship team by clicking [HERE](#). Thank you.)

P.S

For your Interest: Songs Of Praise this Sunday, ABC HD, 11:30am, Sun, 25 Oct 2020, 30 minutes is focused on '*Love Thy Neighbour*'

Aled Jones is on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent, exploring its history and seeing how Jesus' teaching 'Love Thy Neighbour' is being put into action in the community.

