

The Lord and The Lawyer
Sermon on Matthew 22:34-40 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, October 23, 2005

One day, Jesus noticed that his robe was getting old and frayed. He asked about where to get a new robe, and everyone said that Samuel of Jerusalem was the best in town. So Jesus visited Samuel and got measured. A week later, he came back, and Samuel had made a magnificent robe that fit perfectly. “This robe is terrific! How much do I owe you?” asked Jesus. Samuel replied, “It’s been an honor to make this robe for you. I couldn’t accept money for it. However, if you wanted to, you could mention at your sermons that you got your robe from Samuel of Jerusalem.”

True to his word, Jesus hit the lecture circuit and at the end of every sermon said, “Say, folks. Have you noticed this great robe? I got it from Samuel of Jerusalem.”

Time passed. Jesus noticed that his robe was getting frayed again, so he stopped in to see Samuel the next time he was in town. Samuel was overjoyed to see him. “It’s great to see you again! You’ve been great for my business! I can’t keep up with orders. I need to expand my business and would like to go into partnership with you. We could call it ‘Samuel and Jesus.’” Jesus said, “I prefer ‘Jesus and Samuel.’” They discussed the merits and benefits each would bring to the business for several hours, going back and forth: “Samuel and Jesus, Jesus and Samuel, Samuel and Jesus....” Finally, the men agreed to a compromise: Lord and Tailor.

I wish I could say the exchange between the Lord and the lawyer was as friendly as the one between the Lord and the tailor. Jesus had been engaged in a series of controversies with his religious opponents, and he had just come off a win in round two against the Sadducees when the Pharisees sent a lawyer to interrogate him in round three. “Teacher,” said the lawyer, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” (Mt. 22:36).

On the surface it seems such an innocent question, indeed a helpful and insightful one. There were 613 commandments, rules, and precepts in the law of Moses, which posed all kinds of problems: If the law of Moses revealed the will of God for Israel, and there were 613 different rules and regulations to be obeyed, how could anyone keep track of all of them, much less obey them? Were some laws more important than others? Would God care if you jaywalked, just as long as you didn't covet your neighbor's ass? The Rabbis conducted rather spirited debates among themselves on just these questions, trying to make distinctions between "hard" or "heavy" commandments, such as 'honor your father and mother' (Deut. 5:16), and "easy" or "light" commandments such as the one that said that if you found a bird's nest on the ground, you could take the young but you had to let the mother go (Deut. 22:6-7). In principle, all the laws were equally binding. So a question about the most important commandment was perfectly legitimate.

'Which commandment in the law is the greatest?' It sounds like kind of question one might pursue in a philosophy seminar or a Sunday school class in a lively but friendly "scholastic dialogue."¹ Indeed, in Mark's version of the story, the scene is initiated by an interested scribe making a sincere inquiry, followed by Jesus' reply and the scribe commending Jesus for his answer, and ending with Jesus telling the man he is not far from the kingdom of God. Matthew rejects such a love fest, and casts the exchange in hostile terms: The lawyer, the idea of the question as a test, even the address to Jesus as 'Teacher' all suggest that this is a setup and a trap. In Matthew, only the devil and the Pharisees dare to test Jesus.

What is so sinister about the lawyer's question, which commandment in the law is the greatest? We need to remember that the law of Moses consisted of 613 individual laws: there were 248 positive commands that represented the 248 parts of the body, and 365 negative commands that represented every day of the year. The law was meant to apply to every aspect of

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *Matthew*, New Interpreters Bible vol. 8 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) 424.

your life: every part of you, every day. To pick one law out as more important than all the rest would open Jesus to a charge of annulling the law. To make one law greater than another would disparage one part of the law. Tom Long says that if the 613 laws had been 613 rules of baseball and the question was which rule is the most important, and “Jesus had replied that ‘three strikes and you’re out’ was the most important rule,” the lawyer could have come back and asked why the most important rule isn’t ‘four balls and you walk.’”² You could tell the lawyer was licking his chops, waiting for Jesus to answer and his chance to cross-examine.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” said Jesus. “This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Mt. 22:37-40). Jesus’ answer was as rhetorically clever as it was profoundly true. The lawyer had asked about one commandment, and Jesus had given him two. The laws were neither original to Jesus nor to the New Testament. In fact, the commandment to love God with all one’s heart, soul, and mind was found in Deuteronomy 6:5 that all Jews repeated twice a day, every day. The commandment to love one’s neighbor as one’s self is found in Leviticus 19:18.

And so the Lord takes questions of law and turns them into questions of love. In doing so, Tom Long says, Jesus “undermine[s] the whole notion of law as rules and regulations. What Jesus claims is that the whole law is about love, not rules, about really loving God and one’s neighbor....”³ Love unites all of those 613 individual commandments into “a single vital system.”⁴ Love is “the fundamental principle underlying and illuminating everything in the entire complex body”⁵ of the law of Moses. Love should motivate our every word and action; it

² Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 255.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Robert H. Smith, *Matthew*, Augsburg New Testament Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 265.

⁵ R.T. France, *Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985) 265.

should guide what we say and do. As St. Paul says in Romans 13:10, “Love is the fulfilling of the law.”

The question for us, as followers of Jesus, is how are we to obey the greatest commandment, or what St. James calls the “royal law” (Jas. 2:8)? Jesus says first we are to “love the Lord your God with all [our] heart, and with [our] soul, and with all [our] mind.” Robert Smith says this means that we love God “with your whole and undivided self.”⁶ Jesus, then, is calling us to love God with the kind of love with which God loves us, a love that in Eugene Boring’s words is “unmotivated and unmanipulated, unconditional and unlimited.”⁷ We love God because God first loved us (1 Jn. 4:19). God proves his love for us by providing and protecting; by giving and guiding; by helping and healing; by saving and sanctifying us. God loves us with all that God is and all that God has. To love God with all our heart, soul, and mind is to love God completely—with all that we are and all that we have.

The second commandment is like the first, in that it is equal to it: we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. Jesus assumes what is only too true about us, namely that we are basically self-centered creatures, and so we must be commanded to love others the way in which we love ourselves. In loving ourselves we tend to our own needs. We seek what is best for ourselves—what will lead to our honor or advantage or gain. The command to love our neighbor, then, is a command to tend to the neighbor’s needs and to seek what is best for the neighbor—what leads to his or her honor or advantage or gain. And thus the call to love the neighbor is a call for justice and peace and to live and share in a community of brotherhood.

It is said that lawyers like loopholes, and perhaps in his question to the Lord the lawyer was looking for one. Instead, he found the law of Christ, the law of love, the law that gives life.

⁶ Smith, 265.

⁷ Boring, 425.