

## Love Versus the Law

Jesus had been teaching and performing various miraculous acts throughout the region of Galilee and Judea for over three years. Many of the religious leaders had either heard Him or heard of Him. Some had actually come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah whom they had awaiting. Most of them refused to accept Jesus as the Messiah or Christ. They were so deeply entrenched in the nuances of the Law of Moses and all of the traditions that had evolved over the centuries that they could not or would not see Jesus as the Messiah.

In the early days of His ministry, the Jewish religious leaders were curious as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. Some of the interactions recorded in the gospels reflect honest questions by people trying to learn the truth. However, as Jesus neared the end of His mission on earth, the divide had been set. Those that believed and those who did not were clearly and sharply divided. They would not listen to any more arguments or debates. Those who came near Jesus to listen were only looking for more evidence to support their beliefs.

One point for clarity needs to be understood. Within the Jewish community, there were three sects: the Essenes, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees.

The Essenes are not mentioned directly in the Bible. They were men who tended to live in seclusion. It is thought they lived in caves near the Dead Sea and perhaps were responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls. Paul may have been referring to them in Colossians the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter when he writes about men who worshipped angels and held to mystic philosophies. They were first mentioned in historical writings around 100 BC and by 70 AD, they vanished from any mention. The Sadducees were the aristocrats of their day. They were tended to be wealthier than many of the others. Because of their position, they held the majority of the seats in the 70-member council in the Sanhedrin. The Sadducees basically only recognized the Torah (first five books of the Old Testament). They did not hold with the oral traditions that had been handed down. They did not believe in angels, demons, the devil, the resurrection, or the afterlife they thought the soul ceased to exist upon death. They tended to be more political than religious so they ceased to exist after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

The Pharisees were the heroes of the common man. They held fewer seats in the Sanhedrin but their popularity with the populous gave them significant political clout. They, not only held to a strict reading of the entire Old Testament, they added thousands of rules that they considered to have the same weight as the original law. For example, they would not spit on the ground on the Sabbath day because it might cause a hole in the ground and thus violate the ban on working on that day. They did believe in the resurrection, the afterlife, rewards after death, angels, demons, heaven, hell, and eternal life. The apostle Paul is one of the better-known Pharisees who became a Christian.

Today, we will be in the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Matthew. The timing of the events recorded in Matthew the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter likely occurred on Tuesday after the triumphant entry into Jerusalem and just three days before Jesus is crucified.

Jesus faces many questions from both the Sadducees and Pharisees. These questions are an attempt to find some flaw in His teachings so they may discredit Him or prove that He is a fraud. The Sadducees ask about a widow who marries her husband's brother(s). They are seeking to trip Jesus up on the issue of the afterlife and the resurrection. Jesus silenced them with His answer (Matthew 22:29-33).

Let's open our Bibles to the 22<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of Matthew as we read beginning in the 34<sup>th</sup> verse.

**But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together. One of them, a lawyer (i.e. *an expert in Mosaic Law*), asked Him a question, testing Him, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:34-36 NASB)**

The Pharisees saw how Jesus had silenced the Sadducees so they have one of their experts “test” Jesus. From the question, we see the Pharisees tend to rank the various laws from lesser laws to greater laws. We tend to rank sins from smaller or insignificant to large or mortal sins. Neither idea is found in the Bible.

**And He said to him, “‘YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost (or *first*) commandment. The second is like it, ‘YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 22:37-39 NASB)**

Jesus quotes from their scripture to answer. In Deuteronomy 6:5, we are told to love God with every fiber of our being (heart, mind, and soul). Then in Leviticus 19:18, we are told to love our neighbor to the same degree we love ourself.

Jesus clearly put our love for God as the first, greatest, or foremost commandment. He goes on to tell us that everything from God (the Law and the Prophets) are based on these two commandments. From our message a few weeks ago, we see that Jesus looks at the laws are how we should live. Everything hangs on our loving God and loving our neighbors. The main point that Jesus is making is that love is central to the law. Without love there is no reason or meaning to the Law. This ties in well with what we find in John’s first letter where he makes loving God and our neighbor inseparable.

**If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:20-21 NASB)**

Now, let’s return to our scripture in Matthew the 22<sup>nd</sup> chapter and picking up in verse 41. Upon answering that question, Jesus moves to trap the Pharisees. Jesus builds His case for claiming to be the son of God. Jesus now ask the Pharisees a question.

**Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question: “What do you think about the Christ (i.e. *Messiah*), whose son is He?” They said to Him, “*The son of David.*” (Matthew 22:41-42 NASB)**

Jesus turns the focus of the conversation toward Christology. Jesus wanted them to move away from debates over taxation and resurrection and to focus on the Messiah. In the question about the identity of the Messiah, Jesus polarized the Jewish leaders. They must take a side. Either they agree that Jesus is the Messiah or they must take steps to silence Jesus. This is the point where the Friday crucifixion is decided.

They answered properly that the Messiah would be the son of David. So many of their prophecies tell of the “root of Jesse” and the son of David. They could not answer any other way. Now Jesus ask them a final question. It is a question where they either chose to believe that he is the Messiah and also the son of God or they chose to reject Him.

**He said to them, “Then how does David in the Spirit (or *by inspiration*) call Him ‘Lord,’ saying,**

**‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD,  
“SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND,  
UNTIL I PUT YOUR ENEMIES BENEATH YOUR FEET”’? (Psalm 110:1)  
If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his son?” No one was able to answer Him a word,  
nor did anyone dare from that day on to ask Him another question. (Matthew 22:43-46  
NASB)**

Jesus was not trying to win a debate. He wanted the religious leaders to realize that the son of a carpenter who grew up in Nazareth was the true Messiah or Christ from God. When they refused to see that, they move on to bring about the sacrificial part of God’s plan. They would nail the Messiah to a cross and He would die for our sins. He would ultimately be raised from the dead to conquer death and the grave. God’s love would be manifested to the maximum extent.

Have you ever heard the acronym that the Bible is “Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth”? It may be one of those cute saying but it is terrible theology. It turns God’s word into a book that tells us what we must do. If the Bible is about what we need to do and not about what God has done for us, we are all in deep trouble.

Both the Sadducees and the Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus by posing questions about the Law and strict obedience to the law. For them, life had no meaning apart from living in fear that some law or tradition had been violated. They like so many of us fail to see the love of God that is infused throughout the Bible.

Jesus addressed the greatest commandment and we see it is love. Jesus came to fulfill the law and Paul tells us about that fulfillment in his letter to the Romans.

**Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. For this, “YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfillment of *the* law. (Romans 13:8-10 NASB)**

The call of the gospel is to love. We are to love God above everything and we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is the whole of the gospel. The God who established everything loves us so much that He sent the Messiah, the Christ to die for our sins. Love demands that we live by the example of that Christ and love our neighbors.

Today’s passage is the last public address by Jesus before His crucifixion. He told those who were concerned about rigid observance of the Law that love was and is the crucial requirement to understand the law. Our love will cause us to care for those around us. Again, we are reminded of what John wrote: **If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1 John 4:20-21 NASB)**