

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Second Sunday in Lent, March 17, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 10, 55:4, 59, 153, 130:1.

Lessons: Psalm 110, 1 Corinthians 12: 1-3, Mark 8:27-38.

Text: Matthew 22: 34-46.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Our human pride takes great pleasure in hearing and seeing someone else humbled. The Sadducees were enemies of Jesus and wanted to do anything they could to humiliate him. They had asked Jesus a question about eternal life. They did not believe in eternal life and had asked Jesus a ridiculous question about life after death. Jesus told them ***“You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God,”*** (Matthew 22:29 NIV) and he, as the sinless Son of God, went on to humiliate them.

This teaching of Jesus during the last week of his life is not merely to show his superior ability in argument or prove he is a great debater. This Word of God shows us plainly, from the Word itself, that Jesus really is the Son of God who was sent into the world. Today we are reminded again of

WHO JESUS REALLY IS

1. **Jesus instructs the Pharisees about “the greatest commandment(s)”**
2. **Jesus instructs the Pharisees about who he really is.**
3. **Jesus instructs us, too.**

The Pharisees were no doubt delighted to see that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, but they did not hesitate to ask Jesus another question themselves. Their sinful pride blinded them to the fact that Jesus could also silence them just as he had silenced the Sadducees. So those who do not learn from the mistakes of others are condemned to repeat them.

When Matthew tells us that the Pharisees ***“gathered together”*** he uses exactly the same Greek phrase that we find in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, in Psalm 2, where it says, ***“The rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One.”*** (verse 2, NIV) It is significant that only two verses later the psalmist tells us, ***“The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them.”***

In our sermon text we are told that ***“an expert in the Law”*** asked Jesus, ***“Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*** This question was asked by someone who prided himself on what he thought was a superior knowledge of the law, but obviously he missed the big picture, and the real purpose of the law of God.

Perhaps it is not immediately clear how this question is designed to test Jesus. One writer pointed out that a teacher of the early Christian Church, Saint Jerome, was perceptive enough to see that all of God’s commandments are equally great. No matter how insignificant it may appear to us, whatever God commands is great because he is God. So, if Jesus elevates one commandment above another, he will be exposed as a liberal who does not esteem all of God’s law as highly as he should. But in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had already asserted that neither the smallest letter nor the least stroke of a pen would by any means disappear from the Law. At that time he said ***“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same***

will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:17-20 NIV)

In answer to the question of this man, notice that Jesus says much more here than merely, "Love God." First of all Jesus calls God "*the Lord,*" a clear reference to the God of the Old Testament. The Lord's mighty acts of deliverance and his clear commandments throughout the Old Testament reveal who he is and what he is like. Furthermore, Jesus calls him "*your God.*" This implies that a relationship already exists. When Jesus commands us to love the Lord our God, he wants us to respond to the love God has already shown to us.

Although Jesus was asked to single out one commandment, he insists on giving a two-part answer. The first great commandment must come first, and the second great commandment must come second, but they are equally important.

We often see the Ten Commandments pictured as two tablets of stone joined together, with the first three commandments pointing out our responsibilities toward God, and the fourth through the tenth commandments pointing out our responsibilities toward mankind.

But we must never forget the purpose of the law. We summarize this even for our children by teaching that the Law of God shows us our sinfulness and our need of a Savior. We just cannot obey the commandments of God. We cannot obey them well enough to earn our own salvation. We cannot obey them perfectly as God demands.

John exhorts us, "*This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.*" 1 John 4:9-12 (NIV)

So far Jesus has been answering questions. Now it is his turn to ask a question: "*What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?*" We miss the point if we see Jesus' question as nothing more than tit-for-tat. "You asked me a question, now let me ask you a question". That is not it at all. His is a serious question, and an honest answer would bring his opponents to a correct understanding of him as the very Son of God whom they are opposing. He is, after all, the Son of God as well as a descendant of David according to his human genealogy. As the Son of God he came to live a perfect life in perfect obedience to all the commandments of God. As the Son of God and Son of Man he then was punished for breaking all those commandments – in our place, because we break all those commandments. He was punished, the innocent for the guilty, so that God might give to us, the guilty ones he declares "Not Guilty", eternal life because of what Jesus the Christ did.

Jesus asks them "*What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?*" As Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he showed himself to be the long-awaited Messiah, but he did so in the humblest manner, riding upon a donkey – and a borrowed donkey at that. But now, as he puts this question to the Pharisees, he makes the highest claims for himself as the Messiah. He will not only sit on the throne of David but also at the right hand of God. Pharisees expected the Messiah to reestablish the golden age of David and Solomon, to cast off the Roman yoke and put an end to the Roman taxes they hated. Many people yet today are looking for Jesus to establish some kind of social justice in the world. But Jesus sees the glory of the Messiah in the fact that he is David's Lord, and in an act of divine condescension he is willing to become also David's son.

When Matthew tells us "*the Pharisees were gathered together,*" (KJV) we hear another echo of Psalm 2, which was mentioned earlier. This ties their question about the Law together with Jesus' question about the Son of David. Jesus is the Lord of the Law because he is also David's Lord.

Martin Luther made another connection between the two questions. He pointed out that Jesus preached the Law when he answered the question about the greatest commandment, and then he preached the Gospel when he declared himself to be the Son of David who was prophesied in Psalm 110, our Old Testament lesson this morning. Furthermore, it is through faith in the Son of David that the Holy Spirit gives us the desire and the strength to love God and to love our neighbor. And it is in the Son of David – who is also the Son of God –

that we find forgiveness for all those times when we have failed to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. And it is in the Son of David that we find forgiveness for all those times we have failed to love our neighbor as ourselves.

When Jesus quotes the Psalms, he is quoting the hymnbook of the Jews. Have you ever noticed all the theology in our hymnal? The words in our hymnal make it an excellent teaching hymnal. As the liturgy and the hymns are repeated year after year, they embed themselves in the minds and hearts of the worshipers. The cumulative effect is that we eventually come to believe what we pray and sing. That is why some of the most effective religious instruction takes place in our worship services, often while people do not even realize they are being instructed. But the worshiper who has absorbed the words and phrases of the liturgy and the great hymns has learned to speak the language of his mother, the church. Hymns and our liturgy are one way we keep on growing ***“in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”*** (2 Peter 3:18).

Jesus says that when David wrote his psalms he was ***“speaking by the Spirit.”*** Jesus usually speaks of the inspiration of the Scriptures in passing rather than making a point of it. Jesus simply takes it for granted that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God. Instead of laboring to establish the authority of Scripture, Jesus simply quotes it. In his typically colorful way, Martin Luther said that trying to use human reason to defend the Word of God is like a soldier using his bare head to defend his sword. After all, the Word of God is ***“the sword of the Spirit”*** (Ephesians 6:17).

So when David, speaking by the Spirit, calls Jesus “Lord,” we see another illustration of Paul’s teaching, ***“No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit”*** (1 Corinthians 12:1-3) as you heard in our Epistle lesson today. Martin Luther comments: “The Holy Spirit wants to preach only Jesus Christ; the poor Holy Spirit doesn’t know anything else.” So the Spirit teaches David, and David teaches us, that the promised Son of David is also David’s Lord. The mystery of the God-man is right there in the Old Testament hymnal, the Psalms.

Jesus used the scriptures to teach and instruct those who heard him in person. But he also teaches us in that way. We must look to the whole of Scripture for instructions, for as St. Paul writes to the Romans – this from the King James Version – ***“whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.”*** (Rom 15:4 KJV)

Please hear those words from the New International Version, and let this be our closing doxology this morning.

“Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: ‘The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.’ For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Rom 15:2-6 NIV) Amen.