

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

In the portion of Scripture we are considering today, Jesus' enemies, the Pharisees, come to Jesus with a question. Now, they often asked him questions, not because they wanted to learn from him, but because they wanted to trap him, and use his own words against him. And we've seen how easy that is to do as we see how the presidential candidates are quick to pull their opponents words and phrases out of context to make them look bad. But with Jesus, these trick questions never had the desired effect. Jesus always answered so wisely, and so completely evaded their trap, that they were left with nothing. Although many of their questions were intended as a trap, the question a Pharisee asked of Jesus in this reading is actually a pretty good one. "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

The Pharisees, as they searched and studied the pages of the Old Testament, found 613 laws. 613! They spent much time discussing these laws and thinking about them. Can you imagine just memorizing that many laws? And then they tried to figure out how to live their lives according to them. No wonder they asked the question.

It wouldn't surprise me if you have asked a similar question. God gives us many laws. We want to serve God as best we can. Do you always feel you have God's commandments straight? Do you sometimes struggle because you don't know what to do?

Or perhaps you've wondered if all commandments are equal. Are some more important than others? For example, is the 5th Commandment (which tells us not to murder) a greater and more important commandment than, say, the 8th Commandment about bearing false witness against our neighbor? To keep it all straight, perhaps we need to know not just each and every command of God, but also the weighting or the importance of each command of God. Which are most important and crucial? If we could especially focus on the most important commandments, that would be a good start, right?

And so we see that when the Pharisee asked Jesus "which is the greatest commandment in the Law," it actually was an important question of great interest to all people. Jesus does say directly and plainly what that greatest commandment is. And he says to you and me today: "Keep it!"

Alright, so what is that "greatest commandment?" It's actually very simple to understand. Jesus did not answer by picking out one of the 10 Commandments and labeling it as greatest. Instead he said this: "*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.*"

Love God. Love your neighbor. That's it. And what word is common to both? Love. The greatest command is love. But there's a reason Jesus put the first one first and the second one second. He says first, above all else, love God. And when you love him, do so with your all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. With every facet of your being, with your whole self,

love God. Emotions, thoughts, words, actions, intellect, will... all together loving God. And to what extent? He repeats the word “all” three times. Completely, and holding nothing back, love God.

But even though this is the first and greatest commandment, Jesus couldn't keep it just at that. He immediately follows with, “And the second is like it. “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This second commandment necessarily follows the first. It is not optional even though it is second. It is every bit as essential. In all our dealing with other people, we must love them no less than we love ourselves. Look at others as an extension of self. When considering if another wants and needs your help, simply ask... “If that were me, would I want and need help?” If yes, following this second commandment means we will help.

Then Jesus says, “*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*” In other words, “love” is the peg or the hook on which all the commandments hang. Literally imagine a big strong hook anchored in a cement wall. That hook is love. Now think of every law and command you can think of in the Bible. Imagine it hanging on that peg called love. That's what Jesus is saying. Pull out the “love” peg, and I don't care what you say or do, you are not obeying God. Think about that. If you pull out the love peg... if your words or thoughts or actions are lacking love, not motivated by love and don't have love as their goal, your thought word or action cannot be and is not pleasing to God. This is why Jesus listed these two commandments as the greatest.

It's really quite simple to understand isn't it? The Pharisees counted 613 laws in the Old Testament. Maybe you look at the Bible and you are confused about how best to serve God because of all you read there. But it's actually extremely simple: If you loved God perfectly and always loved your neighbor as yourself, wouldn't you then be keeping all of God's laws all the time? You would never have another god. You would revere God's name and never curse or swear. You would read, learn, and obey God's Word, you would honor authorities, not hurt, harm or kill a living being, never have immoral thoughts or actions, never take another's property, never slander another or gossip and always be content with what you had... all if only you had perfect love all the time. I just rattled off all 10 commandment. All of them hang on the peg called love.

Simple to understand, isn't it? Now we get it! Love God! Love neighbor! Love is the greatest commandment. We understand perfectly! But now stop and think. Are you keeping this greatest commandment? How do you measure up? Just this one day... think of all you've done today so far... have you loved God perfectly with your whole being and loved everyone around you no less than you love yourself? You haven't, have you? And I haven't either. The more we think about this, the more depressing it is! We have conditioned ourselves to think that we're pretty good people. We watch the evening news and we pat ourselves on the back, because there *isn't* a story about us there! We see our neighbors and our co-workers and maybe some of our own relatives, and we think, “I'm not so bad! I'm keeping God's commandments better than most!” Then Jesus crashes in on our pride with his simple and essential command to love... and we quickly realize... *we haven't done it.* We haven't done it!

Our Scripture text doesn't tell us the response of the Pharisees when they heard Jesus' instruction about the greatest commandment. From what follows, though, I get the impression that they kind of huddled around near the temple for a while and started discussing this amazing

truth and all its implications. Could it be that they started to realize how simple God's law is... and yet how utterly impossible it was to keep? I bet some of them did. Could it be that some of them for the first time began to feel the pangs of guilt as they realized they weren't good enough and weren't doing enough to satisfy God? I think that's reasonable to assume.

Now Jesus comes to them, and for the first time he now asks *them* a question. All these questions they had been asking to try to trap him... now it's his turn to ask a question to make them think. "*While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?"*"

All that talk about the greatest commandment was good and necessary, but it most certainly was incomplete. It left out the most important part of God's revelation... the part where God does something about our imperfect, deficient, and flawed condition. Our lack of love has left us damaged goods which cannot enter into God's kingdom. What a terrible way to leave matters. Jesus goes to the Pharisees to fill in what's missing. And what's missing is: *Christ*.

In their infatuation and love affair with God's law, the Pharisees had completely overlooked the most important thing God ever revealed: the Gospel... the Good News... the promised Christ who fixes what's broken, restores what was lost, and unites what's been separated. Jesus gently points them in the right direction:

"What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. 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?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions."

Jesus directs them to an Old Testament Psalm which they knew very well. It is a prophetic Psalm which is talking about the Messiah... the Christ. The Pharisees saw the promised Messiah or Christ to be a man... a descendent of David who would make Israel great again. Jesus sets them straight. That Psalm says, "*The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."*" The NIV has all caps for the first "LORD" and only an initial cap on the second "Lord." This is because in Hebrew, there are two different words for "Lord." The all-caps LORD is the Hebrew word "Yahweh"... or as we sometimes say: "Jehovah." This was the formal name God gave himself. The second word for Lord is equivalent to "master, lord." So David said, "The LORD/Yahweh said to my Lord/master..." Or to say it even plainer: Jehovah God said to my descendent/lord/mediator (in other words, the Christ)... And what did the God say to the Christ, "*Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet."*" The Christ is called "Lord." The Christ was to have power and authority over all of God's enemies. The Christ was David's son and David's Lord. True God and true man. Both divine and human.

Jesus is telling those Pharisees, "You are totally missing the single most important part of God's revelation in the Old Testament. God promised many times and in many ways that he would send the Christ (which means the anointed one)... his own Son... true God and true man... who would accomplish what we are incapable of accomplishing.

Jesus was telling them, "You Pharisees are so caught up in what you think you need to be doing for God that you've totally overlooked what God does for you. You're so busy thinking about how you must love God, that his love for you has completely gone over your heads! God's love is so great that it was not just for pretty good folks... not just for believers... but for the entire world... the whole human race, past, present and future! God's love for you is so great that

it caused him to offer up... not a lamb... not a good man... not an angel... but his very own dear Son who was with him from eternity. What love! For you!

Friends this is what Christianity is all about. How many times have we pulled that “love” peg right out of the wall, and made all of God’s law come crashing down with it. We’ve blown it... over and over again... many times a day. But God so loved you and me and everyone, that he sent his very own Son and God from eternity, to be born of a woman, to be born under the law, that he might buy back you and me who are being crushed under the weight of the law. Jesus held up that heavy law and never dropped it. He kept the love peg in the wall and fulfilled every single commandment hanging from it. Search the Gospels and see the endless examples of his tireless and constant love. Then see how he willingly took the blame for our lack of love. We are guilty for not keeping the greatest commandment. And Jesus agreed to take the blame. He suffered. He died. He was buried. And our lack of love was buried with him, never to be seen again. When Jesus rose, we were declared by God to be perfect keepers of the greatest commandment... and all other commandments too.

Friends, now you know. You know the greatest commandment. It’s simple, isn’t it? Love. Simple, yet impossible. But don’t despair, look to Christ, true God and true man, who has removed your guilt and made you perfect before God. Knowing God’s great love for you, now you have power. Now you have motivation. Power and motivation to love God with *all* your heart, soul and mind. Power and motivation to love your neighbor as yourself. Friends, keep the greatest commandment! Love, for He first loved us! Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen (Philippians 4:7)