

How Can A Person Be Right With God?

Text: Mat 22:34-46

Suggested Hymns:

297, 261, 164, 288, 339

1) The Jews Thought In Terms Of Man
And The Great Commandment

2) Jesus Directs Them To Look To God
And the Promised Redeemer

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 22:34-46, ³⁴ *But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together.* ³⁵ *Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying,* ³⁶ *“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”*

³⁷ *Jesus said to him, “ ‘You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ”* ³⁸ *“This is the first and great commandment.* ³⁹ *“And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”* ⁴⁰ *“On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*

⁴¹ *While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, ⁴² saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?” They said to Him, “The Son of David.”* ⁴³ *He said to them, “How then does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying: ⁴⁴ ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool”’? ⁴⁵ “If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his Son?”* ⁴⁶ *And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore. (NKJV)*

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Many people in our day have lost sight of the Church’s real business. Some people think of the Church as an avenue for fund-raising. Some organisations call on the churches to publicise its activities. Many people seem to think of the Christian pulpit as a platform to promote all sorts of things.

Now some of these causes may be good in themselves, but they are not the business of the Church. They are not the proper subjects of the sermon in the

Christian Worship Service. The sermon concerns itself above all, with the spiritual needs of people, and their relationship to God. Let us therefore consider the question, *How can a person be right with God?* May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Jews Thought In Terms Of Man And The Great Commandment

The Jews Tempt Jesus

On the day on which the words of our text were spoken the Pharisees and Sadducees were engaging in their favourite pastime, that of vying with one another in an attempt to ridicule their respective positions, and of endeavouring to trap Jesus in His talk.

The Pharisees were first. They challenged Jesus with a question concerning tribute to the Roman government; but the reply of Jesus was so discreet that they were compelled to retreat, only to gather their forces for another attempt.

Later on the Sadducees came forward with a trick question concerning the resurrection of the dead, which they felt sure would make the position of Jesus, as well as that of the Pharisees, appear utterly ridiculous in the eyes of the people.

Thus they hoped to gain a two-fold victory in one assault. But Jesus based His reply on the Old Testament and showed them to be without understanding of the Scriptures or of the power of God, so that they were silenced before the people.

This, then, appeared to be the golden opportunity for the Pharisees. Jesus had defeated the Sadducees; now they would come in to challenge Jesus and by doing so would make themselves the undisputed champions in the eyes of the multitude.

Which Is the Great Commandment?

The Pharisees felt themselves fully equipped for the occasion. They had a question which they themselves had never been able to answer adequately. In fact, they felt quite sure that Jesus could not possibly give an answer without incriminating Himself, and getting into conflict with Moses, the great and honoured lawgiver of the Jews.

The Pharisees had codified no less than 613 laws, 248 positive laws, and 365 negative laws. Many of these had been declared, at one time or another, to be the most important. But there was no general agreement among them.

With some it was the Sabbath command, with others the law of circumcision. Some were deeply concerned about the proper width of the fringes on their mantles (robes), others felt that the correct size of the phylacteries (frontlets) was of greater importance. Still others placed greater stress on sacrifices.

But each reply came into conflict with Scripture, and so they felt that Jesus would either have to compromise Scripture or else remain silent. To us this whole dispute concerning the comparative importance of various laws seems altogether irrelevant, even unnecessary and senseless, but not to the Pharisees. To them it was immensely important and practical. To them it was a matter of life and death, of heaven or hell, because they looked for salvation on the basis of the Law.

It appeared impossible to fulfil all the commands and demands of the Law of Moses, as well as of the great rabbis, so they argued about which command was of the greatest importance, and by fulfilling it they hoped to become sufficiently righteous to merit a position with Father Abraham in heaven.

Securely armed with an unanswerable problem and with a smirking smile on their faces, they appointed one of their group, a particularly keen and able lawyer, to propose the question to Jesus, ***“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”*** The implication was: *You claim to be a great teacher and rabbi; now show yourself to be a master of the Law by answering this question which has been a matter of contention among the ablest thinkers of our people for many years.*

By this time not only the Pharisees, but the people as well, were keyed up to see what Jesus would answer. Would Jesus choose the Sabbath as of prime importance, or would He perhaps lay greater stress on the sacrifices? Or would He acknowledge defeat and remain silent? It really didn't matter too much to the Pharisees which course Jesus followed. In any case, they felt quite sure, Jesus would now get Himself into difficulty.

The Law Requires A Holy Heart

Jesus replied, “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.*”³⁸ “*This is the first and great commandment.*”³⁹ “*And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*”⁴⁰ “*On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*”

The people were amazed at His answer. The Pharisees were silenced. All the mocking retorts which they had planned in advance they had to keep to themselves. Even their shrewd and able spokesman who was to lead in the rebuttal could do no more than exclaim in wondering surprise, as we read in Mark 12:32, “*Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth.*”

Their trouble was, as the very question which they proposed revealed, that they had completely misunderstood the doctrine of the Lord Jesus. He had showed them previously, as for example in the sermon on the Mount, that there was more to the Law than its mere literal observance. It was not just a matter of avoiding murder or adultery, false oaths, or taking revenge.

Rather it went back to the attitude of the heart from which these evils proceed; and so, in expounding the Law, Jesus showed that it demanded not merely outward observance, but rather a heart motivated by love, filled with kindness, mercy, and compassion, a heart vibrating with pure and holy desires and overflowing with truthfulness and reverence for God.

The Law set as a goal for men the holiness of the righteous God, as given in Leviticus 19:2, *You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.* It demanded perfection equal to that of the Father in heaven, as we read in Matthew 5:48,⁴⁸ “*Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.*”

Love Is The Fulfilling Of The Law

Thus it was unthinkable that Jesus should single out one of the commandments of the Law as of greater importance than another. Jesus did not think of the Law merely as a series of “do’s” and “don’ts.” It simply isn’t just a succession of things required. It is a unit.

Ultimately, it demands but one thing of man, righteousness, or holiness, which simply means that we conform fully and completely to the will of God, deviating neither to the right nor to the left.

God requires that we be one with Him in our thinking and our wishing, our willing and our doing. Since God's essential being is above all, one of love, for **"God is Love,"**¹ therefore all the requirements of the Law may be summed up in this one word — LOVE. Accordingly, the Apostle Paul reminds us, **"Love is the fulfilling of the Law."**²

And if this one requirement of the Law for love may be divided at all, we can divide it with respect to the object of our love, as Christ does in the text.

First, He calls for single-hearted, full, and complete devotion to God: **'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'** And from this love to God there flows a river of love to our fellow man, **'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'** And yet these two commandments are really one, they both demand LOVE. They are one also inasmuch as they are inseparable.

To love God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and then not love your neighbour is unthinkable. To love your neighbour as yourself, as God demands, and still not love God is impossible, for it is from the love of God that the love of the neighbour receives its strength and power.

The Law Cannot Save

Now if the Pharisees were wrong in thinking that there was one commandment above all others which must be fulfilled in order to merit heaven, is the answer of Jesus (that the Law, as a whole, in its fundamental demand for love) the way in which a person can get right with God?

If it was possible for a person to keep the Law of God perfectly and all his days conform fully in thought, word, and deed to God's standard of holiness and perfect love, then indeed he could by doing this gain eternal life. Jesus says in Luke 10:28 concerning this summary of the Law: **"do this and you will live."**

But there is a problem. Knowing the commandment of the Law is one thing, but doing it is another. The Scripture informs us, and our consciences confirm it, that **"there is not a just man on earth who does good And does not sin."**³ There is no one who can say: **"I have loved God with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind, and my neighbour as myself."** Just to hear a person make such a statement would certainly make us think: **"That person is lying."**

Human nature is such that we inevitably find ourselves, our thoughts, our wishes, and our actions coming into conflict with the love of God and the love of our neighbour. God's requirements in the all-inclusive words of Jesus convict us of our shortcomings and transgressions and demonstrate the truth that *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*⁴ Surely, *"Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin."*⁵

So this summary of the Law, far from showing us the way to get right with God, only convinces us how far we have fallen short, how impossible it is for us to get right with God in this way. It proves how much we have displeased God and how much we deserve His wrath and punishment, for the Law carries with it the curse upon the evildoer: *"The soul who sins shall die."*⁶

Here lay the mistake of the Pharisees. They did not realise, and refused to open their eyes to, the truth that the Law fails men as a means of gaining salvation. The Law could not save them. And they could not save themselves.

Modern Pharisaism

Have we learned from the error of the Pharisees, or are we still making the same mistake for salvation by our own merit? As the Pharisees singled out one or a number of commandments and hoped that by doing these they might find heaven, so we, as modern Pharisees, are tempted to do similar things.

There maybe people today who perhaps choose the Third Commandment as all-important: *"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy."* Apparently they feel that as long as they go to church and go through the outward motions of worship, they are Christians and must therefore be saved, and then they proceed to neglect the fulfilment of other commandments. They assume that their church attendance will take care of everything. They lack the fruits of true repentance and faith and thereby show that they are not children of God at all, but merely modern Pharisees.

On the other hand, there maybe those who think of this Third Commandment as of lesser importance. They admit, of course, that they do not hear the Word of God and worship the Lord on the Lord's day, as they perhaps ought to, but they feel that the fact that they do not murder, or steal, or commit adultery, or get drunk, more than makes up for their neglect of the Third Commandment.

These maybe also modern Pharisees who choose for themselves certain commandments as of greater importance and base their hope of salvation on the outward observance of the commands which it pleases them to recognise. But Jesus' words, "***You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,***" definitely assert that you cannot get right with God or earn salvation by keeping one or two commandments that you chose to obey outwardly, or even by the Law at all. Romans 3:20 says, ²⁰ ***Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight.*** Away, then, with all boastful Pharisaism and self-righteousness! The Law cannot save you. How, then, can a person be saved?

2. Jesus Directs Them To Look To God And The Promised Redeemer

While the Jews in answer to this question thought in terms of man and the great commandment, Jesus directs them to look to God and the Promised Redeemer.

When the Pharisees had been silenced and were unable to raise any objections to the masterly and noble reply of Jesus concerning the summary of the Law, He might have dismissed the matter from further discussion, because He had foiled their attempt to tangle Him in His conversation.

But for Jesus this was not a mere manoeuvre for a position of advantage and prestige among the people. As always, Jesus was deeply interested in the salvation of souls. Inasmuch as His reply to their question had demonstrated that the Law, in which they expected to find salvation, was totally unable to help them get right with God, He therefore used this occasion to direct their attention to the One through whom salvation could be had, namely, the Messiah, who according to God's promise was to come into the world and redeem fallen mankind.

To introduce this subject into the conversation, Jesus asked them, "***What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?***"

The Pharisees immediately replied, "***The son of David.***" That the Messiah, or the Christ, was to be a descendant of David was well known to every Jew. This they could answer in a moment.

But the Pharisees had blinded themselves to the fact that Scripture foretold that the Messiah would be infinitely more than just the son of David according to

the flesh. Jesus, therefore, sought to convince them of this, from their own sacred Scriptures, which they highly revered, and out of the mouth of their own great King David, whom they acknowledged as a spiritual leader.

Jesus said, ***“How then does David in the Spirit call Him ‘Lord,’ saying: “The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool””? ⁴⁵ “If David then calls Him ‘Lord,’ how is He his Son?”***

Jesus’ line of thought is this: It is surely most unusual for a father to refer to his son as his Lord. Yet your great King David calls the Messiah, his son or descendant, his Lord, and even such a Lord to whom the Father in heaven grants the position of power and majesty at His right hand, saying, ***“Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”*** Surely, then, the Messiah must be much more than merely the son of David; He must also be the true and only-begotten Son of God, as Scripture also elsewhere testified.

Thus Jesus sought to prove to them from the Scriptures that they were wrong in thinking of the Messiah only as a man in Israel. The son of David, yes, according to His human nature, a man born ***“of the house and lineage of David”***; and yet infinitely more, David’s Lord, ***“the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father,”*** as the Nicene Creed describes Him.

This miracle of the twofold nature of Christ, that He was the Son of God, yet clothed in human flesh and blood, is also brought out forcefully in the Athanasian Creed: ***“The right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man of the substance of His mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.”***

My Kingdom Is Not of This World

By directing the attention of the Pharisees to the greatness of the person of the Messiah, Jesus surely also wanted to show them that their idea of the Messiah’s kingdom was not correct.

They were looking for a political saviour, one who would gather and lead a great army, throw off the yoke of the hated Romans and re-establish the kingdom

of Israel as the leading nation of the world. But the very greatness of the person of the Messiah must also be an indication that He would be more than an earthly ruler, His task and mission in the world must be more than just to establish Jewish sovereignty.

His would be a spiritual kingdom, an everlasting kingdom of righteousness, of love and peace, a kingdom in which people would find the way to God and receive His salvation. Such was the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, of which He said, ***“My kingdom is not of this world.”***⁷ Thus Jesus sought to turn the thoughts of the Pharisees away from man and the Commandments of the Law in their quest for salvation and to direct them to look to God and the promised Saviour, who offered full salvation in the blessed Gospel.

The Old But Always New Gospel

Outwardly the world has changed in many respects since Jesus spoke these words of our text. But the way of salvation has not changed. ***“The Word of the Lord endures forever.”***⁸ It was impossible for the Jews of Jesus’ day to save themselves. It was impossible for them to earn salvation by means of the great commandment or by the Law at all. It was impossible for them to escape the condemnation and curse of the Law by anything that they might do or say. It is equally so, as far as people are concerned today.

There is only one way of salvation for them, and that was through the promised Messiah. Jesus is that Messiah, the ***“Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”***⁹ Jesus gave Himself into the death of the Cross to blot out the transgressions of men and to earn righteousness to cover man’s sin and wickedness. He shed His holy precious blood on Calvary, that He might reconcile God and man and bring peace to men. Jesus made it possible for a man to get right with God, namely, by the pardon and salvation earned for man on Calvary.

And there is no other way of salvation, as Peter reminded the Jews: ***“Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”***¹⁰ It is equally so today, for ***“the Word of the Lord endures forever.”*** Christ, the Saviour of the world, is still the only Hope for sinful mankind. Only through Him can we be at peace with God and assured of our heavenly Father’s gracious favour.

Therefore it is very important that we be able to answer Jesus' question: "***What do you think about the Christ?***" Blessed, eternally blessed, are all those people who with believing hearts can make this the confident expression of their faith, "*Jesus Christ is my Saviour, my Redeemer, through whom I am at peace with God.*"

Love brings forth Love

Such a believing child of God will also receive a clean heart. He will be a new person, for Scripture says, ***if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.***¹¹ The boundless love of Christ, evidenced to us in His sacrifice of love for our redemption, will call forth and produce in our hearts a love to God in return. And as this love for Christ, nurtured by the Gospel and the Sacrament, increases from day to day, so we will find ourselves striving to please God in all things and to do His holy will.

That love of Christ for us will be the source of our love to Christ, and that love of Christ will also help and strengthen us to love our neighbour. Therefore it is only through the Gospel of Christ's redeeming love that we can even begin to fulfil the Law and strive to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind, and our neighbour as ourselves.

May God grant us His Holy Spirit, that we may daily increase in such love and glorify our blessed Lord of love. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 1 John 4:16

² Rom. 13:10

³ Eccl. 7:20

⁴ Rom. 3:23

⁵ Rom. 3:20

⁶ Ezek. 18:20

⁷ John 18:36

⁸ 1 Peter 1:25

⁹ John 1:29

¹⁰ Acts 4:12

¹¹ 2 Cor. 5:17