

You Shall...Because You'll Want to!

Pastor Dave Shackle
October 26, 2014

Over the past few Sundays, in our readings from the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' religious opponents are treating him like some modern-day politicians treat [or mistreat] their opponents. They twist Jesus' words, and utterly condemn his core message. They question his authority to teach and to lead. They criticize his association with "unsavory" people. ['Did you hear the rumors about Jesus and Mary Magdalene?'] Last week we read how the Pharisees try to trip him up on the issue of tax reform, and make him look weak on foreign policy when it comes to dealing with Caesar. Yet through it all, Jesus is able to handle their mudslinging campaign with remarkable composure and some clever comebacks of his own.

In today's reading, the Pharisees give it one more try, as one of their experts in religious law presents what [they hope] is an unwinnable challenge: to make Jesus declare which of God's many commandments is the greatest. They figure, whichever one he picks, he's going to alienate the people who don't like his choice. However, once again, Jesus not only out-smarts his challengers - he also challenges *them* to think about how their own lives and faith could be more open and loving.

Rather than selecting one Commandment from Moses' Top Ten List, Jesus takes a commandment from the Book of Deuteronomy, and links it with one found in Leviticus. And rather than choosing one of the many "Thou shall *not*" commands, Jesus picks two commandments that inspire people to realize what they *can* do, to live-out their faith in good and wholesome ways. Then he confidently concludes that these two commandments are the foundation for all the Old Testament Law and all the teachings of the ancient Hebrew Prophets. And finally, Jesus silences his critics by trapping them with one of those tricky "gotcha" questions - the convoluted kind they really like to ask, but really can't answer. And from that day forward, the petty and picky questioning stops. At least it stops for Jesus.

Unfortunately, you and I don't have to look very far to find that same kind of picky and mean-spirited scrutiny taking place today. There are still many highly religious individuals who see it as their highest duty to aggressively check-out other people's faith, to make sure that it's up to par. [In other words, to make sure that it's in line with their own specific, sanctimonious doctrine.] And they check the "correctness" of others' faith in a variety of ways.

For some, it's a matter of confessing the exact same creeds, and adhering to the same precise principles. For others, the testing is more along political or cultural lines - are you a conservative or a liberal? Do you really think that same-gendered couples can have loving and healthy relationships; or do understand why God thinks its "icky" - and therefore punishable by death and eternal damnation? Some claim that it all boils-down to the way you're baptized. They'll basically "throw-out the baby with the [baptismal] water" - insisting that you gottta get dunked as an adult, or it's down you go to that big broiler below! There are even people who carry nifty little pamphlets containing "The 4 Spiritual Laws for Life Everlasting" - or "The Seven Sacred Steps to Eternal Salvation" - or "The Concise Christian Checklist of Religious Do's and Don'ts" - all to determine who the *true* believers truly are!

I know a pastor who came-up with a *fun* way to deal with those *fundamentalists* who use these kind of “checklists”. He says, “Let me tell you about a friend of mine, and you tell me if he sounds like a good Christian. This friend doesn’t drink or smoke. I’ve never known him to lie or swear, cheat or steal. He’s polite, and faithful, and a truly loyal friend. So, what do you think - does he sound like a good Christian?” Most of the people he asks say, “Sure, he sounds like a fine Christian!” Then the pastor says, “Well that’s interesting, because I just described my dog!”

The point is, that the core of our Faith, isn’t a list of “do’s” and “don’ts” - it’s a positive and uplifting message of Divine love for all people, as revealed in Jesus Christ. And our job as followers of Christ, isn’t to tell others what they must do or not do; it’s to share with them what God has already done, and what God *continues* to do to bless and enhance all of our lives. The message and ministry of Jesus Christ is a living and active manifestation of *Good News*; so maybe a person’s most authentic response to Christ’s message, is to manifest that Good News primarily through his or her *actions!* Or as Saint Francis of Assisi puts it: “Preach the Gospel always; but use words, only when necessary.”

Each time Jesus’ detractors try to trip him up with words, he basically cuts through all that verbiage, and goes directly to the heart of what truly matters. To do so, Jesus often reinterprets, or even rejects, many of those ancient Hebrew teachings that are being used to judge, or oppress, or crush people’s lives. Jesus understands that the real purpose of faith is to help us live lives that are full and meaningful, kind and fair, peaceful and joyful, gracious and compassionate. This is why Jesus proclaims that the greatest commandment - to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind - *must* be merged with that second one - to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. After all, how can we possibly love a God who we’ve never seen, if we don’t love our sisters and brothers who we encounter every day? How can we truly love God, and yet despise all those wonderfully diverse people around us who are created in God’s image? According to Jesus, we can’t!

When you and I truly recognize the amazing Beauty, Grace, and Compassion that has been poured into all of us, and throughout this entire Creation, our desire and our ability to love increases tremendously! As the First Letter of John says, “We love, *because* God first loved us!” Genuine Love isn’t something that can be commanded! Nor can it be created by inducing fear, or making threats, or promising a special reward if we can somehow prove ourselves as “better” than the rest. However, when you and I actually experience the awesome depth of Divine Love and Grace, we will *want* to do what is right and uplifting and in harmony with our Divine Source from Whom all good things arise.

To love God with all our heart and all our soul, means that you and I center our lives in Divine Compassion - by praying, and meditating, and listening for God’s still-speaking voice around us and within us. We will look deeply inward - and expansively outward - for the Divine Mystery and Majesty which is present throughout the Cosmos. We will love our Creator, by taking better care of this Creation and all that lives within it. And as you and I do this, our hearts will be inspired, and our souls will be enriched.

But we won’t just love God with all our heart and all our soul, we will also love God with all our *mind!* O, how I wish that more people of faith would take these words of Scripture as seriously as they claim to take the rest of Bible! Because it declares that the Holy One not only says that it’s *O.K.* to think; we are actually commanded to do it! This means that you and I have the freedom *and* the responsibility to ponder - and to speculate - about the Vast and Marvelous Nature of our Original Sacred Source. It means that we can read the Bible with a completely open mind, while still embracing all the intriguing insights of history and literature, psychology and science, philosophy and even other religions.[I’ve never understood why people who claim with absolute certainty that “Jesus is the Only Way” feel such a strong need to protect him against other faith traditions.]

To me, loving God with all our *mind* can help us regard the written Word of Scripture through the mind-set of Jesus Christ - the Living

Word of genuine grace and openness. The One whose own words and example encourage us to not get bogged-down by religious jargon or judgements; but to pay closest attention to our *actions* - and our interactions - with those people we encounter every day. Or as Jesus so succinctly puts it, that we “Love our neighbor, as we love ourselves.”

When you and I truly do this, then all that other “religious stuff” will be set aside, and we will freely and joyful live our lives as genuine people of God. People who will gladly “preach the Gospel always; but use words only when necessary.”