

Heart, Soul, Mind, Love

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

Text:
Matthew 22:34-46

© Copyright 2011
James F. McIntire
All rights reserved.

October 30, 2011



Hope United Methodist Church
Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA
Phone: 610-446-3351
Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org
Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net
Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 37He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 38This is the greatest and first commandment. 39And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” 41Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: 42“‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’” They said to him, “‘The son of David.’” 43He said to them, “‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 44‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’?45If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’” 46No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.



The movie *City Slickers* is about three middle-aged urban guys – Billy Crystal, Daniel Stern, and Bruno Kirby – who face their mid-life crisis by deciding to spend some vacation time on a dude ranch which has them driving cattle from New Mexico to Colorado. One of the only downsides is that they have to put up with a snarling trail boss named Curly – Jack Palance.

One day, Curly lets them have it. They are flabby, undisciplined New Yorkers.

Curly: Do you know what the secret of life is? [holds up one finger] This.

Mitch: Your finger?

Curly: One thing. Just one thing. You stick to that and the rest don't mean [nothin'].

Mitch: But, what is the "one thing?"

Curly: [smiles] That's what *you* have to find out.

What one thing is most important in or for your life? All of us have to discover it for ourselves and live accordingly. What is that one thing that can guide you through everything else that comes down the pike?

Lawyer: Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?

Jesus: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

On these two commandments, Jesus says, “hang all the law and the prophets.” Hang like a gate on hinges, I once heard this relationship described. On these 2 equally weighted commandments of God, both of which have been dear to Jews since the very beginning of their history, all of faith is dependent. Without these 2 commandments which include love of God, love of self, and love of neighbor, everything else collapses around us – the whole gate falls off the fence if the hinges let loose.

Heart, soul, mind – those are what lead you to the god who you love and to whom you will turn your loyalty. Is that god the One God who Jesus reminds us is creator and lover of us all? Once you

know where your heart, soul and mind are – then you will know where your love of God, neighbor and self is.

The question, “Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest,” may appear non-confrontational today. But when it was originally put to Jesus, it was full of hidden landmines. It was full of possibility for endless debate because most religious people, and especially most religious experts like the lawyer in the text, assumed that they already knew the answer to the question. In answer to the question, “Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?” most religious experts and legal authorities would have answered, “Every commandment in the Law is great, because all of them come from God, and it is God’s will that we obey all of God’s commandments.” That would have been the acceptable answer. That would have been the orthodox response.

The religious leaders had derived 613 commandments from God out of the Pentateuch or the five books of the Law. Two hundred and forty-eight of them were prescriptive or things that God told them to do. Three hundred and sixty-five of them were prohibitive or things that God forbade them to do. Six hundred and thirteen laws in totality, each one of them carrying the truth of a divine imperative, each one of them carrying the authority of Moses, each one of them having the full endorsement of the faith community and religious tradition

The lawyer believes that he now has Jesus in a compromising position, in a no-win situation. Surely Jesus, who claimed to be sent from God, could not deny any one of the 613 commandments given by God, but if Jesus gives this answer as the lawyer assumes he must, then the lawyer could follow up with this question, “Jesus, if every commandment in the Law is great, because every commandment in the Law comes from God, then, Jesus, we need for you to tell us why you are guilty of breaking so many of them.”

Today we celebrate once again a baptism. Each time we do this as a community we need to be asking ourselves – we who are already baptized – what is the one thing that each of us must do before anything else? What is our primary obligation in this world if we are truly followers of Jesus.

Jesus doesn’t simplify the decision about priorities so that we can easily dismiss it. Jesus reminds us to love ourselves, sure, but only so that love then points us beyond ourselves. He commands us to love our neighbors, yes, but precisely because we are inherently selfish. Our inclination is to love ourselves first, putting our personal needs before the needs of others. And he commands us to love God because we are similarly inclined to place ourselves at the center of the universe to the detriment of our love of God.

Where is your heart?

One of the best preachers in the church today, Fred Craddock, tells about two US Christian missionaries in China, a married couple with two small children. When the communists came to power, somebody told them, "You will have to leave the country. You can only take one hundred fifty pounds between you." The couple surveyed the beautiful treasures they had accumulated: the hand-carved breakfront, the ivory carvings, the priceless ink sketches on rice paper. It was an agonizing process to choose only a few special items that they wished to keep. When they arrived at the dock with their carefully packed bundle, a man with a clipboard looked at all they had brought with them. "Did you weigh your children?," he asked. Suddenly all of their accumulated possessions didn’t matter. Priorities.

Where is your soul?

What is it that is at the very depth of your being? Deep down inside where no matter what you might want to argue on the

surface you just know that something very different is God's reality. What is deep down inside your soul?

No matter what political opinion you might have, your soul reminds you that people are people and need not suffer without food or shelter or safety – so you are part of a church that opens its doors to let homeless people sleep in the basement in response to God's call to provide radical hospitality to strangers. No matter what argument might be made about regulating immigration into the United States – my recent trip to Arizona revealed to me the stark, tangible reality of people dying in the desert trying to make their way here from Mexico to make a better life for their children and I was reminded that my soul *knows* that water and food and medical assistance can never be a respecter of artificial boundaries and that as followers of Jesus we *must* protect our brothers and sisters – as God reminds us that we “shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” (Exodus 22:1) We each have been strangers in a strange land.

Where is your mind?

A Baptist preacher described his church experience saying that he grew up in churches that had all the answers. “Heaven was up, hell was down, and we knew who was going in which direction. God created the world in six days--one hundred and forty-four hours. The Red Sea parted just like in the movie. The whale swallowed Jonah. If the Bible said that Jonah swallowed the whale, we would have made that a test of faith. We reduced the mystery of the Unknowable God to *Four Spiritual Laws* that would fit on a post card and still leave room for “The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it.” We didn't have room for questions, because we were certain of everything.”

When he went to seminary he was sure, like many seminarians are want to be, that he would convince everyone else that what he believed – what he *knew* about the Bible – was right.

My first religion class was Introduction to Old Testament. I hadn't figured out that you didn't really have to read the required reading, so after the first day of class I read one hundred pages of Bernard Anderson's classic *Understanding the Old Testament*. In his commentary on Noah and the flood, one line set my blood boiling. Anderson writes that the closing of the ark by the hand of God was a "naïve anthropomorphic touch." I wasn't sure what a "naïve anthropomorphic touch" was, but I knew that my home church would not approve.

I underlined the offensive passage, made several exclamation points in the margin, and marched out of the library to begin the crusade by straightening out the heretical professor who had assigned the profane textbook. I began calmly, but firmly: "Dr. Christian--that's his name--you may not realize that the textbook you assigned questions the Word of God. Here on page 98 it says that in Genesis, which was written by Moses as I hope you know, when we read that God closed the door of the ark, that is 'a naïve anthropomorphic touch.' I'm not positive what that means, but it doesn't sound like a compliment. I don't think we should question the Bible. Do you?"

Dr. Christian, who is aptly named, gently replied: "Brett, do you think that God might *want* us to ask questions about the Bible? Could it be that God wants us to work to believe? Maybe faith shouldn't be easy."

By the conclusion of our conversation, it was obvious even to a state Bible drill champion--Mississippi Baptist Convention, 1971--that there was more real belief in *his* questions than in *my* answers. I transferred my membership from the church of the certain to the church of the questioning.

Where is your mind?

Often we argue that we have the only answers to what it means to love God, follow Jesus, live faithfully. Christians often want to argue that the Bible is accurate and inflexible and inerrant. But if your mind gets stuck there, there is little room for God to move you in this life and in your deepening of your relationship with God. Questions are allowed – required even – if you want to know God and know each other. Questions – even if there might not be answers – but questions need to be asked.

Methodist theology handed to us from John Wesley reminds us that scripture is primary but it is supported by tradition, reason and experience – like a three-legged stool. The Bible is a good place to begin, but we must use tradition, reason and experience to help us interpret what scripture tells us. Scripture is not God's words – it is our human reflection of who God is, how God relates to us, where we see God working in our world, what we believe God wants as our response to God's love.

Those are the questions Jesus leaves us with – where is your heart, your soul, your mind? – where they are, your love will follow. That's not a quick-fix answer to the lawyer's question is it? But it is what it is. Because there are no quick-fixes in scripture and there are no quick-fixes in life and there are no quick-fixes in how we relate to God and each other.

This, says Jesus, is to be our primary principle and method for biblical interpretation. One writer summarized it like this:

More than God is law, God is love.

More than God is judgment, God is love.

More than God is doctrine, God is love.

More than God is prophecy, God is love.

Now abideth faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart and with all your soul and with all your mind ... and your neighbor as yourself.”

Let us go from here knowing that and let us be determined to live that truth.

Amen.