“The Greatest Commandment”

Matthew 22:34-46

October 25, 2026

Reformation Sunday

Our Gospel lesson today shows us an interesting glimpse into Jesus’ travels. The scripture tells us that the Sadducees and Pharisees were ganging up on Jesus. They were trying to trap him. This could be driven by jealousy, fear and certainly skepticism. They were still ascribing “messiahship” to a militaristic type redeemer. And as we know, Jesus turned this notion upside down.

Jesus silenced the Sadducees and “hearing this, the Pharisees got together.” And then one of them, an expert in the law asked on behalf of the group, “What is the greatest commandment in the law?” The irony of is that any faithful Jewish person would know the answer. Jesus replied with what they had heard since childhood—**“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind… and love you neighbor as yourself.**” The Jewish community knew these words, for they were from the Great Schema in Deut. 6. It was part of their collective history. At that time in the life of the nation, the people stopped for a brief time before they went into Cannan, the promised land, the land flowing with “milk and honey”… And that day, they were called to remember and hold on to this most important truth. They were told to speak of it as they rose, when they went to bed at night. And to write it on their doorpost and tie it around their wrists and even foreheads. This was important stuff. **The most important truth. It was/is to be the guide for all of life.**

And once again, people were trying to pervert it. To lessen its importance, if you will. To devalue it. Jesus reminded them of the importance, appealing to their good Jewish intellect, “All

the Law and Prophets hang on these two commandments." All of their scripture could be summed up in these words. "**Love the Lord your God with every part of your being**." One commentator says it like this; *"Love is the grand secret of true obedience to God."* Love that is exemplified and personified in Jesus Christ himself. In a true sense, Jesus was calling the Sadducees, Pharisees and any who had heard to **reform. To reorient their lives back to the true essence of living.** He was offering a chance to change for the better. A call to look beyond the legalistic views of the Word that they had held. He desired that their life, our life be improved, **changed.**

How fitting is this text on this Reformation Sunday. A day that churches all over the globe celebrate "the grand movement." Way back in the 1500s, Martin Luther had his own squabbles and troubles with the "religiosity" of the day. For Luther, the impetus of his 95 theses was **the perversion of the doctrine/understanding of redemption/grace.** For him grace, and therefore the love of Christ was being shelved for a skewed, faulty **and grace-less religion**. So, he called for the entire faith community to reform. To get back to the main thing—***Love fueled by radical grace.***

Bonhoeffer, another great reformer had his best ministry leading an underground church during the Nazi takeover. And he ultimately lost his life for this. In his classic, *The Cost of Discipleship*, he too calls out the Pharisees and Sadducees of his day. He too was livid that the gospel of grace and love had become perverted. He spoke very eloquently and passionately about the difference between cheap grace and costly grace.

In today's gospel, we find, on that day the Sadducees and Pharisees, "cheapening grace." And, the love that is fueled by grace. Hear the words of Bonhoeffer:

Cheap grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church guidance. Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the ***cross,*** *grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.*

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man(person) must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man(person) ***the only true life…*** *Costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus… Grace is costly because it compels a man(person) to submit to the yoke of and Christ and follow him; it is grace because Jesus says: "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."* (Bonhoeffer, 1939.)

We find Jesus reminding the people that day, not just the ones trying to trap him, that loving God and neighbor requires the totality of our being: ***heart, soul, mind*** (and in Deut, "strength").Therefore, it is fitting that we explore these and reflect on how/and **where one or all aspects may need some reform.**

My favorite professor in Seminary was J. Mickey Efird, a Presbyterian scholar, pastor and professor. He reminded us in OT class that the **word of God always calls for a response.** Another way to say it is, there **needs to be application in our daily lives**. (Efird, 1991.) So, I ask us to spend a few minutes on what loving God with heart, soul and mind may mean.

A good image or metaphor for the life of faith is that of a boat or vessel on the water. Many scholars liken our faith to a house, which is a good, interesting way to view the Christian walk. I, personally like the image of a boat best.

Heart—like the hull… where things are housed, kept safe from the elements, a place as Calvin would say of **"inner holiness."**

Soul—The words soul and spirit are used interchangeably in scripture. The Hebrew word *Ruah*- can mean wind, spirit, breath. I liken the soul to the sails of a boat. The sails are fueled by wind to direct and propel the vessel.

Mind—The mind is the compass of life as a compass is for a boat. It provides direction and grounding.

So, we get to ask ourselves which of the three areas do we need to love Christ more faithfully? Which of these three need more work, ***reform,*** of you will. I ask you to join me this week in prioritizing loving Christ deeper and others more soundly.

As the hymnist Adelaide Pollard reminds us:

Have Thine own way Lord, have thine own way;

Thou art the potter, I am the clay.

Mold me and make me

After Thy Will,

While I am waiting, yielded and still. (Pollard, 1906).

Sources

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