Back to School: Back to Basics

A Sermon by: Pastor Harlen Rife

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 October 25, 2026
Matthew 22:34-46

This is the last sermon in my, "Back to School," series and so let's do a little recap. We did math as we talked about Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. We talked about classroom management and remembered that, when we learn from Jesus, we don't compete. We had story time with *Horton Hears a Who* and talked about words and deeds. We had recess – and talked about saving our boxes for the heavenly kingdom. We had speech class when I went to Chicago and we got some of the laity up here. Last week, we had civics and compared our citizenship on earth with our citizenship in heaven. We finish up with a lesson I call simply, "back to basics."

Throughout this series, we've been working our way through the Gospel of Matthew and so the series has included regular discussion of his relationship to Judaism. We believe that Matthew was ethnically, culturally, and religiously a Jewish man. He was writing for a predominantly Jewish audience. He believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah and he went to great lengths to connect everything Jesus said and did with earlier Jewish scriptures, prophecies, and traditions. He also can be antisemitic at times. He couldn't understand why only a minority of his neighbors agreed with his assessment of Jesus and so he could, at times, lash out at them. I mentioned it is important for modern Christians not to take an argument between Jewish people and use it as an excuse for non-Jewish folks to be antisemitic. As we wrap up this series, I'd like to bring that conversation full-circle.

Our reading today is another dialogue between Jesus and the religious elites of his day – the Pharisees. However, this one is a little different. In other such dialogues, the Pharisees try to trap Jesus and he evades the question or answers somewhat cryptically with a parable. Sometimes, Jesus even lashes out at the Pharisees themselves and there are readings that end with them scurrying off to plot his demise. This is not that kind of reading. Here, the Pharisees ask what seems to be a genuine question. Jesus gives a straightforward answer. In fact, his teachings seem so clear and correct that the Pharisees have nothing more to say. This is not a story about what separates Jesus and the Pharisees, it's about what they have in common.

That brings me to my first basic for this, "back to basics," sermon. Do not read the gospels in isolation. We often find versions of the same story in different gospels – especially in the three synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It can be helpful to compare different accounts and appreciate both what they have in common and what makes each one unique. We call a unit of scripture in the gospel a "pericope." So, you can look for the same pericope in other gospels or, if you have a Gospel Parallel, you can see them side by side. There's a version of our story today in each of the three synoptics.

We read Matthew's account in which the Pharisees ask and Jesus answers so well they are silenced. In Mark's version, it's not a group of Pharisees but one man who asks. The text describes the man as a teacher of the law, which might be a synonym for Pharisee, but there's just one of them. When Jesus answers, that man even says, "Well said, teacher. You are right in

saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Luke's version is a little different. It's still an expert in the law, but he doesn't ask for the greatest commandment. He asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks the man, "what is written in the law?" The man says the two great commandments, not Jesus. Jesus praises him but then the man asks a follow-up question: "who is my neighbor." That's when Jesus offers the parable of the Good Samaritan.

The cast in this story varies. The roles vary – who asks and who answers. However, one thing remains constant. Jesus, teachers of the law, Pharisees and Sadducees all agree with this description of their theology. They all agree that, at its heart, their faith centers on a call to love God and to love neighbor. Jesus said many controversial things in his career, things that rattled the religious leaders, the crowds, and even his own disciples. This isn't one of them. This is a point where everyone can agree. Why? Because they are talking about the heart of Judaism.

That brings me to the second basic in this "back to basics" sermon. Keep the Old and New Testament in conversation. The New Testament, with its Gospels and Epistles, is full of references to earlier Jewish scripture. When you are reading a text, keep an eye out for those parallels. A good study Bible will have footnotes at the bottom directing you. When you see a reference to earlier scripture, flip back and read it. Think about what it means in that original context and that can help you get more out of it when it is quoted in a New Testament passage. Jesus' teaching on the great commandments is, in fact, a quote of earlier scriptures.

Jesus is quoting Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Our liturgist Kim read the Leviticus passage for us earlier in this service. The passage commands people to be honest, just, and merciful to their neighbors. It reminds us not to hold hate in our hearts for our kinfolk. It closes by saying, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." When Jesus says love your neighbor as yourself it is in no way news to his Jewish audience. They have heard that since they were little.

The first commandment is even more foundation. It's a passage from Deuteronomy that begins, "These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess, so that you, your children and their children after them may fear the Lord your God as long as you live." Then, a little later in the passage we hear this great prayer, poem, and song:

> Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

This textual passage is the oldest fixed prayer in Judaism. Observant Jewish folks will say these words in the morning and the evening of every day. Some really do tie scrolls to their hands and forehead. If you visit a Jewish home, you might still find a Mezuzah on the doorpost. This prayer

is as central to Judaism as the Lord's Prayer is to Christianity. When Jesus says, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength," the crowd could probably recite it with him from memory. It's no wonder everyone agreed.

In seminary, my Old Testament professor was Dr. Paul Kim. I had him for Intro to the Old Testament and a class on psalms. Over his long years teaching seminarians about the Bible, Dr. Kim found he heard the same thing repeatedly. Earnest young Christians would tell him they didn't like the Old Testament. They were followers of Jesus and the gospel of love and grace he espoused. Dr. Kim quoted them, with a little sarcasm in his voice, saying, "you can keep your angry Old Testament God, I only need my Jesus!" Students would tell Dr. Kim that they didn't need the Old Testament books of law like Leviticus and Deuteronomy when they had the teachings of Jesus. Sometimes they would point to this very teaching and say, "love God and love neighbor," is all I need. Dr. Kim would eagerly point out that, in this Gospel passage, Jesus is quoting Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Dr. Kim is right. Matthew is right. You cannot ignore the Jewish roots of Jesus message.

Unfortunately, that is a trap we fall into as modern Christians. Sometimes, we find ourselves trying to make Jesus look good by making his Jewish neighbors look bad. Jesus does not need our help looking good. Occasionally you will meet followers of Jesus who do not embrace Christ's divinity. They will say that they follow Jesus as a great teacher, but not God. Of course, I disagree with that stance as a believer in the divinity of Christ. There's also a risk in that stance. If Jesus is not divine, then he must be important because his teaching is unique and innovative. For his teaching to be unique and innovative it must be different than earlier Judaism. So, it can push some progressive Christians to mischaracterize or "straw-man," Jewish theology. We say they were legalistic, or misogynistic, or xenophobic until Jesus came along. Jesus' teaching was rooted in Judaism. What made it special was that God was there saying it and living it in person. God was there to point us back to our roots.

That's the last "basic," of this "back-to-basics," sermon. Both Judaism and Christianity are founded on the teachings in the Old Testament and both Jews and Christians believe together that the great commandments are to love God and to love neighbor. Both communities have struggled to, as Bishop Malone used to say, "keep the main thing the main thing." As we study scripture, as we explore ethics, as we try to live our faith, we are often pulled down into the weeds. From time to time, it is good for all of us to pause, step back, and remember the big picture. We are here to love God with all that we have, and to love our neighbors just as we love ourselves. If we're struggling to understand a passage, that should be our first question. What interpretation of this reading inspires one or both those two great loves that make us who we are.

So, here's a recap of this "back to basics," sermon. First, read the gospels in harmony. Do not try to cram them together into one voice and story. Savor their unique qualities. When they sing the same note – the same pericope – pause and appreciate their individual perspectives. Second, do not read the New Testament in isolation from the Old. When there are references and parallels, look them up. The Bible is not one book or one voice. We shouldn't try to make it one. At the same time, the books weren't written in total isolation from each other and

we shouldn't read them that way. It's a big noisy conversation and, to appreciate it, you have to hear the different voices. Finally, and most importantly, when you are asking how best to apply what you find in scripture in your faith life, remember the two great commandments. Look for the love of God and the love of neighbor in everything and you will usually find it. We're going to cover a lot of passages and topics in our years together. If you ever get lost along the way, come back to these three to find your way home. **Amen.**