



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Jesus under scrutiny

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Matthew 22:33-46

33 When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching. **34** Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. **35** One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: **36** "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" **37** Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." **38** This is the first and greatest commandment. **39** And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' **40** All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." **41** While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, **42** "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. **43** He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, **44** " 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." ' **45** If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" **46** No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

It is interesting on this Sunday, when we are thinking of the importance of volunteering here in the Wesley Theatre, that we see in Matthew 22 the religious leaders seeking to trap Jesus Christ with a question about what is the greatest commandment in the law. Jesus' response is a marvellous description of what it is to be actively engaged in Christian living.

Jesus says that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with every conceivable aspect of our lives and the second is to love our fellow men and women. Both of these commandments are derived from and sustained in the Old Testament; the first from Deuteronomy 6:5 and the second from Leviticus 19:18. Jesus' answer could certainly not be refuted by the religious leaders and serves as a valuable contribution to our own thinking and makes a vital connection between the two components of living out the Christian life.

It is important to recognise that this connection was already established in some Jewish thought.

Jesus then asked the Pharisees a question about Messiahship, to which they were unable to respond in a satisfactory way. We are told that after they had made a connection with David, the words of Jesus really had them stumped, so much so that we read, *"No-one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no-one dared ask him any more questions."* (v.46)

Our text in Matthew 22:37-40 is a reply to the religious leaders' initial question:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments."

These words come after a series of sharp encounters between Jesus and the religious leaders. It is interesting that, in his gospel, Luke places this response just before the story of the Good Samaritan.

It is perhaps important to recognise that the way the rabbis are interrogating Jesus is not unusual. They frequently found themselves discussing what William Willimon called “the comparative weight of various commandments”. Jesus suggests that we should love God totally and express our love of God through our love of our neighbour.

As we draw to the close of the year, we are making a brief journey into some of the end chapters in Matthew’s Gospel. Repeatedly, Matthew describes Jesus as One who shows impartial love toward all and this is a mark of the kingdom of God, demonstrated in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus is clear about the nature of our love which must be extended even to our enemies (Matthew 5:43-48).

In this particular context, the religious leaders are endeavouring to have Jesus cite what he believes to be the core of his understanding of what is right– and then trap him by saying that he and his disciples are not stacking up to what they themselves believe are the priorities. They appear to be accusing him of veering away from the real faith of Israel. The importance of Jesus’ response is reinforced by the fact that he goes to the heart of the Jewish faith to answer their question.

We appear to have an early debate about ‘Word and deed’ or, as understood in a variety of contexts in the New Testament, ‘faith and works’. Jesus had no desire or saw no need to separate the two.

It is an appropriate passage to examine, because Christians find themselves easily drawn into the same kind of separation. This is unhelpful and at odds with the ministry of Jesus himself, where believing, doing and the practise of faith are all of a piece ... and should not be separated.

We seek to live out our faith and practice here at Wesley Mission in an integrated ‘Word and deed’ way. The stimulus of much of our mission, especially our volunteering, will find its inspiration in what Jesus is handling at this moment of questioning.

I offer three thoughts to stimulate our thinking on this matter.

WE HOLD FAITH AND WORKS TOGETHER OUT OF INDEBTEDNESS

An important part of our faith is to acknowledge that we are indebted to God:

- Most of what we have comes not by hard work and achievement, even if we are very proud of it, but from God’s gifting.
- The very nature of our faith is a result of the grace in which God meets us.
- Our works are an important expression–indeed more than an expression–of the faith that we have in God through Jesus Christ.

Imagine a bankruptcy court where the bailiff or the appropriate person opens the proceedings and says, “All debtors rise” as the person acting as judge enters the court. Who would feel comfortable in remaining seated at such an order?

Our Christian living reminds us that if we are to be true about ourselves, then we must recognise our indebtedness. This lies behind so much of our volunteering, active discipleship and Christian service. Many people who volunteer, or do things for others through our Community Services, build upon an understanding of wanting to give something back!

I read about a top American university, one of the Ivy League schools, where a campus staff member, during a conversation on standards for admission, declared that the school received incredibly talented young people. However, he said, "The only exception being the legacies!"

Now, the legacies are those places which are set aside for children of alumni, often wealthy alumni, who would not be admitted under normal circumstances, were it not for their parents.

The same staff member went on to say, "I find it interesting that these so-called 'legacies' are some of the most endearing students. Unlike many of the other students, these students know for sure that they are here at this prestigious university as an undeserved gift from their parents."

Of course, if all students were completely honest, they are all recipients of undeserved gifts ... and we all acknowledge this, if we are holding faith and works together.

There is the story of a mother who invited a large number of her friends around for dinner. At the table, she turned to her six year old daughter and asked, "Would you like to say the blessing?" The girl responded, "I don't know what to say." Mother said, "Just say what you hear Mummy say." The little girl bowed her head and said, "Dear Lord, Why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Our gratitude to God and the heart of our Christian service is caught up in a real sense of holding together our faith and works.

It was Ignatius of Loyola who said, "Let us work as if success depended upon ourselves alone; but with heartfelt convictions that we are doing nothing and God everything."

SUCH FAITH IS UNCOMPLICATED

Life has become increasingly complex and people often search for something uncomplicated and straight forward:

- Doing is often a precursor to believing
- Believing should, by nature, be demonstrable by doing
- 'Doing and being' are not separate from saving faith
- The linking of Ephesians 2:8 and James 2:20.

In his outstanding *Screwtape Letters*, C S Lewis has the chief devil urging his young devil to defeat the will of God in the life of a person by ensuring that the person doesn't take the demands of faith too seriously, keeping religious commitment 'moderated':

"If he is of the more hopeful type your job is to make him acquiesce in the present low temperature of his spirit and gradually become content with it, persuading himself that it is not so low after all. In a week or two you will be making him doubt whether the first days of his Christianity were not, perhaps, a little excessive. Talk to him about 'moderation in all things'. If you can once get him to the point of thinking that 'religion is all very well up to a point', you can feel quite happy about his soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all—and more amusing."

In the face of the Nazi threat, Karl Barth led the Confessing Church in a re-statement of the heart of faith in the famous Barmen Declaration. One of his friends, and later his biographer, discussed this issue and noted that the gospel is not first about what we want out of God, but rather the gospel is a declaration to humanity of what God wants of us. Some politicians have used that thought creatively in different contexts and momentous speeches!

Oswald Chambers, in *So I Send You*, commented there are no such things as prominent service and obscure service; it is all the same with God.

- There is a great mistake in elevating a person in language such as ‘he or she is a great person of faith’.
- Faith can be exercised by us all—and by some of the most unlikely of people.
- Faith is demonstrated by what we are and by what we do.

It happened at a road intersection. The traffic light turned green, but the driver didn’t notice it and remained still. A person in the car behind began to pound on her car horn. The woman in the car in front still didn’t move.

What followed was an even more aggressive exercise of non-patience by the person behind. You can imagine how this person reacted when the lights changed to red and the person in the first car realised her error.

Within a few seconds, the angry driver heard a tap on the car window—it was a policeman. He instructed her to close down her car and took her to the police station. She was released several hours later. The arresting officer explained, “I am really sorry for this mistake. But, you see, I pulled up behind you while you were screaming and blowing your horn and, when I saw you making obscene gestures, I felt sure that you had stolen the car. It was the bumper stickers and the fish emblem on the boot that made me certain that this was a car theft. The message is all too clear—as it was for the person concerned.

OUR FAITH ALWAYS RESTS UPON LOVE

In conversations about the uniqueness of Christianity when compared to other religions, one of the distinctive characteristics mentioned is that Christianity is not a static thing, but a dynamic, pulsating activity. Our faith is a life made clear almost as a drama. It is little wonder that throughout history some people have used the picture of our Christian faith as ‘a dance’.

Our scripture this evening reminds us that the faith of Israel and the church rests not only upon the love of God, but also on our love for each other—and especially focused in our love for our neighbour.

C S Lewis nearly always had something to say on these great themes: “Do not waste time bothering about whether you love your neighbour; act as if you did ... When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love them.”

It is one piece of witness that Wesley Mission has held to during the whole of our long history, but it is good to remind ourselves of its importance.

Commenting on the latter part of the passage, one writer observed that at one level it looked as if Jesus had stumped the religious pundits with a riddle they could not solve, and thus they were speechless in the face of his brilliance. But the same writer goes on to make a much more salient point: “... at another level, they are confronted with the true understanding of Messiahship, and they have nothing to say about it.”

Jesus’ combination of the two as the greatest commandments would hold sway over much thought throughout Christian history ... and remains important for us today.

Tim Keller, senior pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, spoke here at our Wesley Centre earlier in the year. He comments that one of the questions pastors often hear people ask is, “I work my fingers to the bone for the church and what thanks do I get?” He goes on to question, “Is that the way it is? Your service was for thanks? Are you in your right mind? Servanthood begins when gratitude and applause end.”

- We respond to God because of his love toward us.
- We reach out to others because his love is indiscriminate and is for all.
- We react by volunteering our time and talents in his service and for the care of people.

A child went to the local store with his mother. The shop owner was a very kindly man and, in keeping with his usual practice, he passed a large jar of sweets to the little boy and invited him to take a handful for himself. Uncharacteristically, the little boy held back and the shop owner reached into the jar and grabbed a handful for him.

Outside his mother asked why he didn't take a handful himself. The boy said, "That's easy. Because he's got much bigger hands than I have!"

So, as Jesus was open to the scrutiny of religious people who were all too ready to criticise him, he offers a way of discipleship where faith and works, love and deeds, and the practical aspects of our faith, growing from spirituality, are able to combine together as the most meaningful answer to such criticism.