

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

Come with me back in time to Holy Week. Imagine a large calendar up here in the front of church. Easter Sunday would be at the left of the Communion rail. On Easter Jesus rose from the grave, triumphant over death as our Savior from sin. Let's work our way backwards into Holy Week. The Saturday before Easter would be at right of the Communion rail. On Holy Saturday Jesus lay in the tomb, dead. \*Let's go back another day. On Good Friday Jesus appeared before Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. \*Let's go back another day. On Maundy Thursday Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples in the Upper Room, instituted Holy Communion, and was arrested on the Mount of Olives, having been betrayed by Judas Iscariot. \*Let's go back another day. On Wednesday, by the baptismal font here... well, we don't know what happened on Wednesday. The Holy Spirit saw fit not to tell us. We call this day "Silent Wednesday."

Let's go back another day. On Tuesday... oh my! How do I tell you all the things that happened on Tuesday? I'll give you just a sample. Tuesday is when our text happens. Jesus' enemies, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, are so upset with Jesus because of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and because of his driving out of the Temple the sheep and the money changers on Monday. Oh, they are fit to be tied! They are trying to find a way to discredit Jesus, make him look bad in front of all the people. The

people hang on Jesus' teachings. He is their superstar. \*But he never pats the Pharisees on the back for being good people or living clean lives. And he never tells the chief priests (who are Sadducees) that they are doing a good job running the Temple. Oh, this Jesus has to go! And they have a feeling that this Tuesday is a very good day to do some verbal boxing with Jesus of Nazareth.

In round one the Pharisees ask Jesus, "*Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?*" If Jesus says "yes," the people will turn against him. The people do not like paying taxes to the Roman Caesar. If Jesus says "no," the Romans will arrest him for touting treason. "We've got him now," they think. But Jesus answers, "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's*" (Matthew 22:21). Round one goes to Jesus.

In round two Jesus squares off against the Sadducees. They do not believe in life after death. They pose the question about which husband a woman will be married to in the resurrection after she has married several times. But Jesus explains that there will no longer be any marriage at the resurrection, and that God is the God of the living, not the dead. Therefore there will indeed be a resurrection. Round two: Jesus.

Then our text begins: Round three.

<sup>34</sup>*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. They got together. Hmm. That's the same word that the Greeks used to translate Psalm 2 from the Hebrew: "*the rulers**

*gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One*” (v. 2b). The Pharisees are getting together against Jesus.

Who are these Pharisees? They are highly disciplined people who pride themselves on how well they know the Scriptures and how well they live according to them. ‘Knowing the Scriptures’ and ‘living according to them’ are good. But the Pharisees are proud about this. Their people include some of the best Bible scholars of their day. But the Pharisees major in minor matters. They are more concerned with the letter of the law than the spirit of the law. For them the coming Messiah is someone who will someday show up and immediately join their association, showing once and for all how good they really are.

This Jesus? He can’t be the Messiah. Why, he teaches that God is gracious and merciful to undeserving sinners! ...that being nice to others and trying your best to be good is not enough to get into heaven! “We must show this Jesus to be wrong.” So <sup>35</sup>*one of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:* <sup>36</sup>*“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”*

In order to understand the trap this expert is laying for Jesus, it may help to know that the rabbis of the Pharisees have found in the Law of Moses 613 commandments. They say that 365 of these commandments are negative, telling us things we should not do—and 365 corresponds to the number of days in a year. The other 248

commandments are positive, telling us things we should do. Coincidentally, they have found that there are also 248 parts of the human body (Ylvisaker, p. 578). So, they figure, their analysis of the Law must be correct—these coincidences cannot be mere coincidences. \*Some of these laws, of course, aren’t as important as others. So the Pharisees love debating which of the 613 is the greatest commandment. \*If this Pharisee, an expert in the law, can get Jesus to pronounce one particular law to be most important, everyone who thinks differently will immediately be against Jesus. “Oh, we’ve got him now, boys! *Teacher, which is the greatest commandment?”* It’s a loaded question, and the Pharisees want it to explode in Jesus’ face.

But the Pharisees have things all twisted around. They rank the commandments from the standpoint of breaking them. For instance, if you swear by the temple that you will do something, you may break your oath; but if you swear by the gold on the walls of the temple, your oath is binding. This same kind of thinking is still around today. You know about the commandment to rest on the Sabbath: do no work. Several years ago I got into an elevator of a building where observant Jews lived. There was a placard which read, “This elevator stops at every floor on Saturday.” Why would it do that? Because riding the elevator is not considered work. But if you push the button to call the elevator or push the button to tell the elevator which floor to stop on, that is work, a breaking of the Sabbath.

But we Christians can be just as bad. Many of us also rank the commandments from the standpoint of breaking them. “Talking bad about others is not as wrong as stealing from them. And stealing is not as bad as cheating on your spouse. But murder is still worse. And those who hurt children—well, they should get no mercy at all.” Have you heard people talk like this? Do you think like this? Do you rank the commandments in terms of breaking them? If so, you just might be a Pharisee.

Jesus shows us that God looks at the commandments from the other side—in terms of keeping them. Which is the greatest commandment? Jesus answers, <sup>37</sup>“*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*” <sup>38</sup>*This is the first and greatest commandment.* <sup>39</sup>*And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’* <sup>40</sup>*All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.*” You could say that these two commandments are the steel peg from which all the Scriptures hang suspended. Pull out this peg and the rest of the Bible’s words fall to the ground in a heap of disarray. God wants us to think of the Commandments in terms of “love.”

This is why the apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, “*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not **love**, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not **love**, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor*

*and surrender my body to the flames, but have not **love**, I gain nothing.*” If we could love God more than anything else, and if we could love our neighbor at least as much as we love ourselves, we could keep all the Commandments.

But we keep finding ways to love other things more than God, especially ourselves. That’s why we make excuses and rationalize our decisions when we know we should do right but we really want to do wrong. And it’s getting worse. On that same Tuesday of Holy Week Jesus said that the love of most will grow cold. Did you know that most Americans have lost the ability to think in terms of what is good for the group? Most Americans, and that probably means most of us too, tend to think in terms of what’s good for “me.” This is why so many of us have our own house or apartment. And even if we’re in a family, we have our own room, maybe even our own bathroom. Or we have our own TV or our own telephone. I don’t mean to say that it’s wrong to have these things. I’m saying that if you belong to a family where you must share, where you must cooperate and coordinate, then count yourself blessed—you may be among the few who still know how to get along with others. You may be among the few who still go to work with the attitude, “I’m going to do my best today because that’s how I can be a blessing to my co-workers.”

This lack of love in our society effects the church. “I don’t enjoy the activity chosen for that event, so I’m not going.” “I don’t like what happened at that meeting. I’m

not going back next time.” See what happens when we no longer know how to think in terms of what’s good for the group?

Jesus’ answer to the Pharisee’s question is trying to teach this truth: the key to a wonderful life is to love God and to love your neighbor. All social sadnesses in this world, from labor disputes to wars, are the result of people not loving their neighbor. All spiritual sadness is a result of people not loving God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind. This is why God would have us work at loving him better, and each other better. All the other commandments are just variations on this theme. Don’t murder because that’s not loving. Honor your parents because that is loving.

But where does that leave us? I’m feeling pretty sad right now. How about you? I have not loved God and my neighbor as I should. If God is to be fair, then those who don’t love should be suffer consequences.

Do you know what we need? We need a Savior to love us and take away our sin, to restore our relationship with God and with our neighbor. Do we also need a reason to work at growing closer to each other as members of the same church? Jesus provides for both of these needs. <sup>41</sup>*While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, <sup>42</sup>“What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?”* *“The son of David,” they replied. <sup>43</sup>He said to them, “How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’?*

*For he says, <sup>44</sup>‘The Lord said to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.”’ <sup>45</sup>If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?”* <sup>46</sup>*No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. By the way, Round 3 just went to Jesus. It is never wise to oppose him.*

But look at Jesus’ **love!** He’s still reaching out to his enemies. See, the Pharisees are looking for a Messiah who will be ‘the Son of David,’ someone with that particular human ancestry. They expect this Messiah to be a second David, a king who will re-establish the earthly kingdom of Israel. \*Jesus is trying to show them that David was looking for a different kind of Messiah, one who would not only be a descendant of his but also his Lord. The Messiah whom the Holy Spirit taught David to look for would also be the Son of God. And as you know Jesus is both the Son of David and the Son of God, just as he told even his enemies. He’s a human. Therefore he can substitute himself for us humans on the cross. He is God, therefore his substitution can count for everyone. Jesus’ whole point is that we can put our faith in him as the one who rescues us from all the times we have not loved the Lord with all our heart, soul, strength and mind, and for all the times we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. Wow! The Lord really loves us sinners. LET’S LOVE LIKE THE LORD LOVES.