*THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE WORLD*

Matthew 22:34-46

October 25, 2020

“Now when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.”

“One of *them,*” Matthew ways. One of the *Pharisees*. You can almost hear the contempt in his voice.

I don’t know what the Pharisees might have done to Matthew, but I can suspect. He’s a tax collector and that’s vile to good Jewish society. And you know how picky and petty the Pharisees can get. Well, in any case, there is no love lost between Matthew and them. He’s the only gospel writer to record Jesus’ strong, in-your-face attack against the Pharisees . . . in the very next chapter, in fact. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs. Beautiful on the outside, but full of dead peoples’ bones on the inside.”

“You snakes! You viper’s brood!” The other gospel writers sort of tactfully leave this section out, but not Matthew. And in our story here this morning, when he says that one of them asked Jesus a question to test him, he uses a word that means something more like trap,” or “trip up.” It’s a verb that no one else uses in Matthew but the devil.

Mark tells this story, too—the story of Jesus being asked which commandment is the greatest—but in Mark’s version the scribe who asks the question seems sincere, and affirms Jesus’ answer in such a way that Jesus marvels and says, “:You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

Not here. New Testament scholars agree that Matthew’s rewriting of Mark’s story changes the form and character of the passage from a scholastic dialogue to a controversy story. We have learned from Matthew to boo and hiss whenever the Pharisees enter onto the stage of scripture.

But today I want to take a more sympathetic view of the Pharisees, if only because I suspect there’s some Pharisee in me . . . and maybe in you, as well.

The name comes from a Hebrew word that means “to separate.” The Pharisees were “the separated ones.” Their motto seems to have been Leviticus 19:2, “You shall be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.”

From sunup to sundown they tried to bee just that. The fact that they believed in the resurrection of the body is not incidental. Remember that “when they heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together.. . . .” The Pharisees and the Sadducees were rival political parties. And the Sadducees did *not* believe in life after death. So there was a built in conflict here. ‘Maybe Jesus is on our side. But we don’t know, so we’ll test him.’

And this resurrection thing. If they believed they would rise from the dead they may also have believed that one day they would stand before God and have to give account of their lives. In a moment like that, you wouldn’t want to say that you had frittered your life away on anything trivial. You would want to say that you had spent your life on the most important thing in the world, and for the Pharisees, that thing was holiness.

This is where our story begins to intersect with theirs, because, even though we may not be committed to holiness in the same way they were, we do try to spend out lives on what we judge to be important. Let me give you an example.

Several years ago Suzanne wanted to go on a diet, and I decided that I could stand to lose five, maybe even ten pounds, too. I knew that good health was important, and I could see that if I didn’t watch my weight, it would, at some point, become a problem.

Suzanne got the book, “The Set Point Diet,” whose premise was that you come to a plateau in losing weight because your body thinks you’re starving, and it sets a set-point. It will resist losing calories and it’ll make fat to keep your starving body (it thinks) alive. So you have to fool the set point. That was the point of this particular diet. Oh, yeah, and all the usual good sense about exercise with the diet, and a balance of nutrients and all that.

So, good, I thought. Don’t eat as much food for a week, and then eat some more for a short period of time, (to fool the set-point into thinking, ‘hey, it’s all alright’) and then restrict pretty severely. And so on, with the exercise and following their meal plan for the proper nutrition through it all. So, good.

So I started to follow the regimen in the book, which started your day with a half a slice of unbuttered toast with a slice of cheese on it. And not much else. Well, I can do this. And then lunch was a half a can of tuna with some sliced up green pepper and a small handful of almonds. O.K. And supper was a half a boiled skinless chicken breast with some broccoli . . . and a little oil and vinegar on the broccoli to make it palatable. I don’t remember the next day, but I remember the breakfasts of dry toast and cheese, and that I was maybe able to follow this diet for . . . a week. And I did lose pounds. A couple here and a couple there, and the next thing you know I became a Pharisee.

I scrupulously and virtuously had my dry toast and cheese on it, and when dinner allowed me to have spaghetti, I weighed every stick on a newly purchased food scale. Everywhere I went I proclaimed the virtues of the healthy life. I became obsessed about my diet, and bordered on becoming obnoxious. It was important too me, and no amount of trouble seemed like too much.

The Pharisees were the same way about holiness. If Ten Commandments were good, twenty commandments were even better. Their rabbis searched the Scriptures for every word of the Lord that could be taken as law, and came up with 613. 248 positive commands and 365 negative commands: a “Thou shalt not” for every day of the year.

For a while it must have been exhilarating—too keep those rules and feel yourself growing steadily healthier. But 613 rules! Don’t you think that for the Pharisees as for me all that rigid discipline could quickly become exhausting?

I found that there were some days I just couldn’t do it. I would be at

someone’s house for dinner where I couldn’t politely turn down the offered lasagna with all that fatty ground beef and goosily cheese. (Mine, you remember, was just for breakfast to get some protein in there to start the day!) Or I would be on the road and think, “Well, if they can’t do dry toast with a slice of cheese, maybe bisquits and gravy would mean I wouldn’t have to even eat lunch. Sometimes yes, most times no. Or I just got tired of weighing out the spaghetti and worrying about every fat and carb gram.

I can totally sympathize with this weary Pharisee who seems to be saying to Jesus, “Teacher, if you couldn’t keep all 613 commandments day after day, if you found that you could only keep 612, what is the one commandment you wouldn’t want to leave out? What is the most important thing in the world?”

And here’s the surprise: while the Pharisees have been knocking themselves out to be holy as the Lord their God is holly, Jesus puts the emphasis elsewhere. “’You shall *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 a second one is like it: ‘You shall *love* your neighbor as yourself.’ All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.”

In one answer, and with these two commandments, Jesus shifts the emphasis from holiness to love. He says, in effect, that it doesn’t matter so much who you are, as how you are, and how you ought to be is loving. *That* is the most important thing in the world.

And that is a needed corrective to how we often live our lives. We are motivated by love, certainly, but most of the time it is self-love. Might as well be honest about it. I didn’t go on that diet because I wanted to spend more years with Suzanne. I went on that diet because I wanted to look good.

The Pharisees may not have kept all those rules because they wanted to be holy, but because they wanted to appear that way.

And so many of the things we do are for similar reasons. We spend hours on expensive exercise equipment so we can be lean and muscular. We work like slaves so we can buy everything our hearts desire. We might even come to church, or volunteer at some care center so we can feel good about ourselves. These activities—for these reasons—have nothing to do with what is most important.

A farmer in New Jersey once told me (we lived din the garden part of the Garden State) that he was thinking of following up on his biology degree by going to medical school and asked me what I thought. I wasn’t sure how to answer. He had a wife and a new baby. His responsibilities on the farm seemed to take up all his time. And now he was going to add to those responsibilities several hours of classes each week and untold hours of homework and memorization?

I was surprised, and suspected it might have more to do with the recognition his sister had received for finishing law school, than with any sudden passion for medicine. I also suspected it might have more to do with his desire to “be somebody,” and earn the respect of his peers, than with any deep desire to help the sick.

A few nights later I had a dream about him, and in that dream I asked him to sit in the chair in his living room. Once he had done that I stood his wife, with his baby daughter in her arms, in front of him. And then I said, “Look, you could spend the rest of your life taking care of these two people, just taking care of these two people, and it would be enough.”

While my friend might not have won the accolades of his peers, he would have won the approval of God, who judges us on the basis of how well we love, and whose judgment, in the end, is the only judgment that truly matters.

I think this is why Matthew (and Jesus, too, for that matter) was so frustrated with the Pharisees. They spent their lives pursuing holiness—which is a good thing—but not love—which is the most important thing in the world.

Amen.