

Sermon for Sunday, March 10, 2024

Mark 12: 28-44

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today's Scripture reading isn't necessarily long in terms of the number of words, but it demonstrates Jesus' deep knowledge of Scripture, his skill in religious debate and his ability to point out hypocrisy. There are basically four sections. I'm not going to pick each section apart in detail, but by the end of the sermon I am going to return to the idea that our most important task as followers of Jesus is to keep our eyes on him; on what he teaches and who it is that he is most concerned about.

To accomplish this goal, let's take a moment to consider where and when this reading takes place. Where is Jesus? He's in the Temple. But the Temple was a busy place and there are lots of other people around including trained religious scholars. When? Based on this passage's location in the gospel we assume that this debate between Jesus and the religious scholars takes place sometime between Palm Sunday and Thursday—Monday, Tuesday, or Wednesday. (*Pause*)

Maybe you have noticed that certain people love to debate; that they relish the exchange of ideas and the consideration of various points of view on a particular topic. They like to verbally spar.

In today's lesson, we have walked into a conversation, a debate, that had been going on for many years over the finer points of Jewish religious practice. Such debates are not and never have been unique to Judaism. People have been debating correct religious practice for many years. Jews were debating it during the time of Jesus (and before). The earliest Christians debated about worship practice as they tried to figure out a new way after Jesus' resurrection and ascension. (And if you hadn't noticed, Jesus didn't give us many specifics now did he?) People still argue about correct worship practice even now, 2000 years later.

What we have in today's reading is a scene in which a theological debate is taking place and Jesus is participating in this verbal sparring. That's when the scribe opens up a hot debate topic: Jesus, which commandment is the greatest? The scribe wouldn't have asked this if it hadn't been something under debate. Jesus answers with the *Shema*. This is the verse that says, "the Lord our

God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." *The Shema*.

This commandment remains absolutely central to Jewish practice and teaching to this day. They say it often; practicing Jews say it at least daily, and sometimes twice daily: at the start and the close of the day. And while this commandment might seem specifically directed toward the Jews; it seems to me that it is also directed toward us Christians. We need to love the Lord with every fiber of our being, with our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength.

- Heart: love God from the center of our emotions
- Soul: love God from the fire of faith that resides within us
- Mind: love God through our mind and understanding
- Strength: love God—not so much with our physical body but with a faith-filled resiliency; hanging on even when life makes faith really hard.

Returning to the debate: it seems in the opening verses that Jesus and the scribe have actually found some common ground; a place of agreement. If so, it doesn't last very long because in verses 35-37 Jesus reignites the debate by working with another passage from the Old Testament. It's a hard argument to follow because of the various uses of the word "lord." He is basically pointing out that a common teaching of the scribes doesn't stand up to scrutiny because a king like David would never bow to his earthly son—unless that son was the son of God. (Jesus)

The crowd listening to this conversation may not have been able to follow the nuances of the debate but they clearly knew who the winner was: Jesus. What's important for us to understand is that the crowd is an important part of the larger setting of the Temple and Jerusalem. Beginning with the entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday as written about in chapter 11 the crowds are watching and listening and following Jesus and not the religious authorities. For a few days in the early part of the week Jesus is sheltered from arrest and prosecution because of the power of the crowds. Jesus is a master at reading people and crowds, and it's pretty likely that he understands that for now, the crowd is on his side.

Therefore, Jesus now goes on the offensive against the scribes and religious authorities in this debate. He points out that their supposedly pious practices are ignoring the warnings and teachings of the prophets about caring for widows and orphans. Then he points out a widow who "has put everything she had, all she had to live on" into the offering box. (*Repeat*) Everything she had; all she

had to live on. With these words Jesus is pointing directly at the disparity between the rich and the poor of his day. He is calling the scribal debaters to account as they are confronted with real world examples of hypocrisy. *(Pause)*

Having reached the end of our consideration of the passage, how shall we keep our eyes on Jesus, and what shall we learn from him?

We may not be the religious elite of our day. We may not be calling for a debate with Jesus. But we recognize our sinfulness and we are always called to repentance. *Incurvatus in se* is a Latin theological phrase describing a life lived "inward" for oneself rather than "outward" for God and others. *(Repeat: Incurvatus in se)* Martin Luther drew on insights from Augustine to introduce to theology an extraordinary image for understanding the experience of being a sinner. 'Scripture', Luther tells us, 'describes man as so curved in upon himself that he uses not only physical but even spiritual goods for his own purposes and *in all things seeks only himself*' (Luther's Works, vol. 25, p. 345, see also pp. 291-92). What Luther means is (i) that despite our best efforts to get beyond ourselves, to love and serve others to the best of our ability, human beings find it impossible to escape the gravity well of self-interest, and (ii) we are often unconscious of this fact, even as it in fact drives our behavior." From a website called *Mockingbird*.

Here's my point: our human tendency is always to curve inward, to continually look to our own well-being. But Jesus calls us to look beyond ourselves; to look outward. He did it in a most poignant and specific manner when he drew his disciple's attention to a poor widow who gave all that she had to live on to the religious institution of her time and place.

When we keep our eyes on Jesus we see someone who sets a very stringent example in regard to love. When he teaches us that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, we must remember that just a few days after saying this he demonstrates the ultimate act of love. He goes to the cross and dies. We must remember that the crowd that had been supporting him and effectively protecting him turns against him. And still he goes. We must remember that the religious authorities mock him at his sham of a trial and while he's hanging on the cross. And still he goes. Jesus' love is a love that knows no boundaries. This is a love that wasn't just for the Jewish people. It was for those fickle crowds, and power-hungry religious authorities. But it was more extensive than that immediate circle of

people. It was for the "others" the Roman army, the Roman officials, the people living in far off cities in places like Greece, and France, and Spain. And it was a love that goes beyond the bounds of time. It is a love for all of those who came into existence in the 2000 years after. It is a love for us here and now in March of 2024. Yes my friends, Jesus died because he is for us: and his love is far bigger than anything that we can imagine.

As followers of Jesus, what are we called to do? Turn away from our constant self-interest, our tendency toward *incurvatus in se* and keep our eyes on Jesus. The Holy Spirit will do the rest. Amen.

11:18: the crowd was spellbound by his teaching

11:32: they were afraid of the crowd, for all regarded John as truly a prophet

12:12: they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd.