

Mark 12:28-34
November 3, 2024

A Promise Kept

Last week the gospel text was about the Healing of a blind man named Bartimaeus on the way from Jericho to Jerusalem and the Triumphal Entry. We noted that in the Gospel of Mark, the last thing Jesus did before his arrival in Jerusalem was to give sight to this man.

The story picked up its pace at this point, through a series of conversations or controversial debates with various people in the city for the festival. There were Chief Priests, Teachers of the Law, and Elders; there were Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. There were more lawyers. Notice, it is with the leadership that Jesus contended.

They questioned Jesus about his authority, about paying taxes to their colonial overlords, and about the interesting topic of marriage in the Resurrection, each time trying to catch him in a mistake of some kind, a logical contradiction. Finally, one of them questioned him about the commandments themselves, which one is the greatest, or most important. After this encounter, we are told, no one dared ask him any further questions.

So, the last action of Jesus before the week of the Passion was to heal a blind man, and the last conversation with the leading citizens was to reaffirm the love of God and neighbor as the greatest of all the commandments, the best summary of their tradition.

There are still some other teachings before the end of the end, and of course the events of the last evening, with denials and betrayals, but in these two occurrences, Jesus puts a stamp on the meaning of his life: sight to the blind . . . love of God and neighbor.

As we mentioned last week, physical sight stands also as a metaphor of knowledge and understanding. It is important that in this sequence, knowledge and understanding are subordinated to love of God and neighbor. He *gives* sight and understanding, but says that the most important command is to love.

As we approach the end of another year in the church's life, and come upon the seasons of Thanksgiving and stewardship, and thoughts of Christ's return, we do well to consider the significance of this distinction. It is more important to love, than to know, or to be right.

This sets us at odds with our times. In an enlightened and technological age, knowledge is the primary good. Yet experience compels us to admit our limitations. We are, in the end, asked to know what can't be known, or what isn't known, what is beyond knowledge. As good and precious as knowledge is, any knowledge, what stands out most is the limitations associated with it.

And there is an amoral quality to it, the longer history goes on, the more we experience the reality that there is no piece of knowledge that can't be used for *good* or *ill*. How it is used and what outcome is generated

by its use depends on moral decisions made independently of it.

In our times, nuclear energy is the prime example. Its discovery promises the solution to the world's energy crisis, if fusion can be added to fission. On the other hand, its use includes the most destructive weapons ever invented and a possible pollution of the environment that threatens great harm. Even our own self-annihilation has been imagined. The pursuit of its discovery involved a moral question . . . should we? And once it was discovered, then moral questions about the right and wrong uses arise.

The idea of love clearly presents us with a different context for the interpretation of life. It is the context of relationships and the right treatment of people. It leads to the discovery of the failures of love, and those failures open up the need of forgiveness and mercy, which leads us directly to the realms of grace and *faith*. And faith, specifically faith in God's action in Christ Jesus, *is* within human reach, at least, in the sense that what God asks us to believe, God also empowers us to believe.

In the middle of the week of that crucial Passover festival and Sabbath, Jesus is encountered by someone who is described as a, "teacher of the law, who asks a simple question about the commandments; "which one is the greatest?" Jesus answers very directly about the rule of love, and sets it as the highest rule.

The teacher, who in Mathew is identified as one of the Pharisees, repeats the answer as an affirmation and adds that the love command is more important than the burnt offerings and sacrifices; which means more important than religion, for us, more important than worship services and bible studies, than evangelistic and social ministries, more important than denominations and musical style and architecture of the buildings.

Jesus recognizes this teacher of the law as a kindred spirit rather than an adversary, "you are not far from the Kingdom of God," he tells him. Only then do the questions stop. Nothing has changed, the end of the week still leads to death by crucifixion. We are taught to believe that this happening is *God's grace redeeming the world*.

So let us remember this and in our hearts decide to pursue the life of love; for friend, for mere acquaintance, and for enemy alike. In our understanding let us always consider what it means that the rule of love is the *highest* rule, and make every effort to apply it to everyone we meet.

As we share this moment together, and make ready for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, let us consider the order of things in this command, that the actual greatest commandment is to love the Lord with the whole being; heart, soul, mind and strength. Upon reflection, we might discover this one to be more difficult than the love of neighbor.

We can at least see, and hear them. And share the basic experiences of life, with even the ones that are most exotic to us, and the one's with whom we disagree, or don't get long. We all must eat and drink and sleep each day, we all live our lives, in this world, and not some other, and in the context of our most intimate relations, the ones with whom we suffer and rejoice when things are going well, and not well, respectively.

We all age, and get sick, and get well, and die. And sin. Whether we like that term or not, we somehow fail in ways we simply can't deny and be healthy, attached to reality.

We all stand in need of grace, and we stand by God's grace. Thus we are united, and united under this command to the whole-hearted love of God, which is not only the highest rule, but the hardest one of all to follow.

And we are united by *this prayer*, that this rule would turn out not to be a command only, but also a promise kept; that in the end by God's grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord, *we will indeed come* to love the Lord our God, with our whole heart, with all our souls, and with all our mind, and with all our strength, and our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

/Romans 5:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we[b] boast in the hope of the glory of God. 3 Not only so, but we[c] also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; 4 perseverance, character; and character, hope. 5 And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. 6 You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. 8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Textual Criticism - "We have," versus, "Let us have."

Predestination in its purest form - that before it all began, God decided that when this circumstance

arose, it would be placed on Christ's shoulders, that is, God would shoulder it.

The Development of Character - Suffering not only does not harm us, it is the way God saves us, thus is redeemed us. Barth calls it (dokime) "probation." Testing, proof.

This passage is one of the great texts because it presents to us the sublimity of the gospel - "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

[Back](#)

[Home](#)