

## SERMON FOR THE 19<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Cape Town - 11 October 2009)

**Text** <sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" <sup>29</sup> "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' <sup>31</sup> The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." <sup>32</sup> "Well said, teacher," the man replied. "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." <sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:28-34)

"It's a long story". "It is a very complex matter". "It is a grey area." These are some of the phrases, which we use to "end" a discussion in a particular situation. Most of a time it is a rather unpleasant and uncomfortable situation in which we need to explain ourselves. But because we don't want to do so, we come up with these phrases: "It is long story. It is very complex matter", and so on.

A father had one of his sons try this on him. After a fight in the house the father asked his son: "Why did you hit your sister?" And the son replied: "Dad, it is a long story." "Well son", the father said, "I like good stories and I have all the time in the world. Please tell me exactly what happened".

So often we avoid a topic or make matters complicated for the simple reason that we want to justify our wrong behaviour. It would be easier just to say, "sorry". But instead of apologising we start a debate - and the moment we sense we could lose the debate and that our wrong actions could be exposed, we come with these "stop phrases" to end the discussion.

The Bible is full of these stop phrases, especially in the ongoing controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees and teachers of the law. When they sensed that Jesus was exposing a wrong behaviour in their lives, they would simply say: "**He eats with tax collectors and sinners**". End of discussion. We don't need to listen to him! But on the other hand, if they sensed they had a chance to win a debate with Jesus, they would complicate matters by quoting one law after the other trying to justify what was clearly a not acceptable behaviour.

This sermon text today follows after a series of such public debates. One of the debates centered on paying taxes. Now, I know we all hate paying taxes, especially when hear that the new chief cop of our country spend a quarter million of tax payers

money on a five star hotel while his residence was being renovated. And when asked to explain, he says: "He didn't realise it was so expensive". Well, the Jews had an even bigger problem with the Romans. **"Is it right"** the Pharisees asked Jesus, **"to pay taxes to Ceasor or not"** (Mk.12:15). They were trying to trap Jesus. But the law is clear - and we all know, two wrongs don't make a right. So Jesus lifted a coin and said: **"Whose portrait is on this?" "Ceasar's"**, they said. And Jesus replied: **"Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's"** - implying, God wants you heart. That is the most important thing. And don't loose your heart, by rankling over money matters.

Now, there was this one teacher of the law listening to these debates with Jesus. In contrast to the others, he was honestly touched by Jesus' answers. Maybe struggling with the complexity of the laws himself, he asked Jesus the question: **"Of all the commandments** (and the Israelites had counted 613), **which one is the most important?"** (v.28). In other words, which commandment is the fundamental one, the one that carries the greatest weight?

As always Jesus' answer is strikingly simple. His answer starts off with the introductory line of a prayer which the Israelites spoke twice a day, every morning and evening. As a constant reminder, they even wrote it on the doors and walls of their houses. The prayer is recorded in Deuteronomy 6 and is known as the **"Shema Israel"**. It goes like this: **"[Shema Israel] Hear, o Israel, the Lord you God, the Lord is one"**. Do you hear that? THE LORD YOUR GOD IS ONE. In others words, there is just one being that rules over you live and to whom you are responsible. You need to remind yourself of this: THE LORD IS ONE! HE IS THE ONLY ONE WHO RULES OVER ME! It wouldn't be bad if you would write that all over your walls as well. The question is not: What does Mr. X or Mrs Y say? Or what is the trend today. There is only one Lord. And HE rules over your life.

And then Jesus says: "If that is the case (and he still quotes from Deuteronomy 6), then you must **"Love the Lord you God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"**. That is how simple it is.

If you sincerely love God, you will keep all the commandments. Martin Luther understood this. That is why in writing his explanations to the ten commandments, he starts every single one of them with the words: **"You shall fear and love God"**. If you fear and love God, you will not misuse name. If you fear and love God, you will remember the Sabbath Day ... and so on. Not keeping a commandment means, I lack in the love compartment". There is not enough God-love.

How should you love God? The commandment is grouped in two sets of two: First,

you should love Him with all your **heart** and all your **soul**. The heart and the soul refer to the inner self, the center of our affections and desires. You will know what desires and ambitions you have, but nothing should compete with this desire to love God more, and to have greater affection for him. That is what your inner feelings and emotions should be focused on.

Secondly, you should love God with all your **mind** and with all your **strength**. Your “mind” and “strength” refer to your intellectual and physical abilities. We don’t always associate our intellect with God-love. On the contrary intellectuals and powerful people are often drawn away from God and aspire a degree of independence from God: “I don’t need God as much as others”. No, love God with your intellect. Use your brain, not to draw away from God, but closer to him.

Up to this point every teacher of the law, every Pharisee would have agreed with Jesus. And even today, if you would go around and ask people: “Do you believe there is only one God and that you should love this God”, they greatest majority would affirm.

But this not where Jesus stops. From Deuteronomy 6 he moves to Leviticus 19 and quotes a law widely overlooked and which did not form part of the “Shema Israel”. He says: **“The second is this: Love you neighbour as yourself.”** From some of the other passages of the Bible, we realise that this is where the Pharisees and the teachers of the law felt the need to justify themselves. The “neighbour” was deemed to be a “grey” and “complicated” area. We complicate it as well. Yes, we want to love God, but we don’t always want speak to that other person that hurt us, or there is a family member we can’t get along with and as a result we avoid him or her.

Who is my neighbour?, another teacher of the law once asked Jesus. And Jesus responded with the parable of the *Good Samaritan*. You all know the story. But do you realise, who in fact became the good neighbour in that story? It was the sworn “enemy” of the man who landed amongst the robbers. In the Kingdom of God there are no exceptions - even the enemy is a neighbour. This is a truth that Jesus repeated on the sermon on the mount. The teachers of the law said: **“Love you neighbour (meaning those who belong to you), but hate your enemies.”** (Mt.5:43). But Jesus said: **“I tell you: Love you enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”**

Why is this so important? And why did Jesus place these two commandments of loving God and loving the neighbour next to one another and linked them together? The reason is: Loving God with all your heart and soul, all your mind and strength, finds its expression in loving the neighbour. Do you want to know whether your really

love God? Look at your neighbour. I look at mother Teresa and know: There is a woman that loved God? How do I know it: She had heart for the poor. She loved those who couldn't even return her love.

God loves my enemy. God loves the person that I battle to get along with. Love connects me with this God. In the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of John we read: ***"If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar."*** This is not a grey area. There is not long story to be told. Lack of love amongst the people of this world, is a sign of an ever diminishing love towards God.

The teacher of the law in our sermon text, agreed with Jesus. As Jesus talked he began to realise: Making offerings and sacrifices mean nothing, if there is no love to God and the neighbour. Likewise coming here on a Sunday, but not being motivated by the love of God, is nothing. The great 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian and church father Augustine said this: "Love - and then do what you like". If the motivation behind your action is love, it is right. God's commandments are not complex. There are not even many. There are just two: Love God and your neighbour. And these two can be summarised in one word: 'LOVE. If there is love, I remember the Sabbath Day. If there is love, I honour my parents. If there is love, I don't commit adultery. If there is love, I don't speak evil of others.

But we rightly confess in the Apostle's Creed: This love we cannot produce "by our own strength or reasoning". It is a love that grows out of our relationship with God. Which God? The God who loves "you" with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind, all his strength. In fact, the "greatest commandment" is nothing else but a reflection on God's own nature. He left the heavens, entered the world, allowed himself to be humiliated by humans, and gave his life on the cross for the gift of forgiveness. HE LOVES YOU and HE LOVES YOUR NEIGHBOUR.

Do you want more of this love? Spend more time with this God and practise this love on your "enemy". As you do, you will be drawn closer and closer to the Kingdom of God where nothing else but LOVE rules. Amen.