

Final Prayer

Jesus, Saviour of the world, You were lifted up on a Cross to draw people of all races and nations to Yourself. Bless the witness of Your church in every place, and help Your people finish the work You have given them to do. We ask this in Your victorious name: AMEN

Matthew 22:34-40

No: 18 Week: 167 Wednesday 26/11/08

Prayer

Fill my heart with love, O Lord, and let it flow out to others:

When I feel downhearted and unhappy, may I still love people;

When I feel upset or let down, may I still be generous of heart;

When I feel disturbed by others, may I not stop doing my best;

So, may I continue to be loving in everything I do and say,

For Your sake, my Lord, who is the source of all love. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Faithfulness

Pray for faithfulness in the work place. The quality of faithfulness is not often high on the world's agenda; but where godly faithfulness is present, the Lord can bless our work.

On-going prayers

- Pray for UN peacekeeping forces in countries around the world
- Give thanks to God for answers to your prayers
- Pray for your national leaders at this time of economic instability

Meditation

We have been created for love

So let us be seen to love one another

We have been created to be passionate

So let us live our lives to the full

We have been created for fellowship

So let us value each other's company

We have been created to be fruitful

So let us use all the gifts God has given

We have been created for a reason

So let us live with direction and purpose

We have been created to be productive

So let us be dynamic and fully employed

We have been created to be spiritual

So let us fulfil the eternal purposes of God.

Bible Study - Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, a lawyer, put another question to Jesus, to test him. ³⁶ 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?'

³⁷ Jesus replied, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ³⁸ This is the primary and greatest commandment; ³⁹ and following this similarly, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. ⁴⁰ The whole of the law and the prophets depends on these two commandments.'

Review

We have now come to the very last question put to Jesus, except those directed to Him by Caiaphas and Pilate in His trial (26:62, 27:11-14). All the questions put to Him were designed to trap Him so that the authorities could make their accusation; they were looking for the slightest comment or slip which would have given them a pretext to have Him killed.

The picture presented by the beginning of our passage is interesting. Everyone who had questioned Jesus had failed to trap Him, so the senior Jerusalem Pharisees gathered to try and threaten Jesus (22:34) with a new method. This time, they used no tricks, but asked a question so broad it would give Jesus ample opportunity to say something they could pick up and dispute. If they could get Him into intricate theological debate, then they hoped He would say something they could use against Him.

The question itself and how others had answered it Their question was topical and widely debated in Jesus' day. How could the Laws of Moses be reduced to a small number of memorable 'key' commands or laws? So they asked; 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?'

To give a flavour of this debate in Jesus' day, here are some examples of the teaching of other rabbis. Rabbi Akiba described the code of Leviticus 19:18 as the 'greatest principle' of the Law 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the LORD'. Rabbi Simlai reduced Moses' 613 commands to 11 commands by David (psalm 15), 6 by Isaiah (33:15-16), 3 by Micah (6:8), 2 by Isaiah (56:1) 1 by Amos (5:4), and 1 by Habakkuk (2:4). Rabbi Hillel reduced it to 'what you hate for yourself, do not do for our neighbour'; a risky analysis of Leviticus 19:18 but the product of a very great Jewish leader!

Jesus' answer was also radical, but firmly rooted in the words of the Law and could hardly be disputed by His accusers. It was so authoritative it silenced the people who first heard it (22:46) and has become probably the most important ethical and theological statement Jesus made. What He did was to combine the words of the Shema (Deut 6:4f.) and the moral principle of Leviticus (19:18a).

The 'great' command Jesus began by quoting directly from the 'Shema', the great prayer said twice a day by all Jewish people. It was Judaism's defining statement of faith and was close to what we might describe as a 'creed'. The full 'Shema' is this: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength' (Deuteronomy 6:4,5). By quoting this, Jesus went to the heart of Old Testament faith in God as understood by ordinary people; it was a prayer they recognised, and it came from the heart of the laws of Moses.

When we look closely at what Jesus said, it differs from the Old Testament in just one respect. The last word of the Shema in Deuteronomy is '... strength', whereas the last word in Jesus' quote is '... mind'. Did Jesus have a reason for changing this word? Was it a reflection of Jesus' intellectual debate or was it simply a matter of a confused translation from Hebrew to Greek to the Aramaic in which Jesus spoke? We cannot be sure, but what is certain is that the passage does not intend to separate out different aspects of human personality for the praise and honour of God. Each of the words; 'heart', 'soul', 'mind', 'strength', relate to a whole person, and the message of the text is that we are to love God with every part of our being.

In addition to this, the section of the Shema Jesus quoted was regarded as an explanation of the first commandment; 'I am the Lord your God ... you shall have no other gods before me' (Ex 20:2,3, Deut 5:6,7). So the teaching of the Shema was that the proper response of worship to Almighty God was found in commitment, obedience and reverence. Nothing could be more basic than this, and the Pharisees could not argue with Jesus for saying this!

The highest ethic Over many centuries, Jewish scholars had, just like Jesus, made reference to the centrality of the Shema, but when it came to defining how the law said people should live their lives, they regularly turned to the great moral code of Leviticus 19; 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself, I am the Lord' (19:18a). What Jesus did quite uniquely amongst Jewish teachers before or since, was to add the Shema to this moral code. In addition, the language he used here in Matthew 22 indicates that Jesus regarded both texts as of equal importance; both comprising one great Law of God. Jesus therefore taught that to 'love your neighbour as yourself' was not a separate thing from loving God; the two were integrally bound up, the one demonstrating the other and vice-versa.

What Jesus did was to switch a light on in the midst of God's Word!. In order to understand this fully, it helps to recall another feature of the way in which rabbis and teachers of Jesus' day sought to read and explain scripture. Generally they did this by making connections between scriptural texts based upon single words which could be easily remembered. Now, if we look at the two commandments Jesus gave, there is one word that occurs in each. It connects the two and it lies at the heart of both texts; it is the single word 'love'.

There was and is no more powerful way for anyone to describe the true nature of God than 'love', and it is also what God requires of us as we respond to Him and to those around us. Love is the universal key to God and all the life He has created.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. What does the first commandment from Jesus' teaching mean to you, and why?
2. In your opinion, how do you go about doing what it means to 'love your neighbour as yourself'?
3. If you did not have Jesus' answer to the Pharisees question, what would you have said was the greatest commandment, and why?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

The challenge to love is the foremost challenge of Christian faith. I have heard many people offer ideas about they believe to be the heart of Christian faith, yet all we need to do is go to this passage of scripture where Jesus makes it clear. He does not offer any further guidance about how love is put into practice because the rest of scripture, together with our experience of life, is the training ground for this. Furthermore, if Christ is with us by faith, He will guide us and show us how to live according to this great command.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *In the context of prayer, ask yourself how much of your own life is lived with an attitude of love? This is a tough question, but why should we avoid it? It may be that the Lord has something to say to you about this, so do your best to listen to what He says.*
- *Spend a week watching carefully the actions and deeds of those around you, and assessing how much love is involved in the various things people do, knowingly or not. How can love improve life for us all?*