**Woe to the Religious Teachers**

**By Pastor Fee Soliven**

**Mark 12:28-44**

**Wednesday Evening**

**July 24, 2019**

**28 Then one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, perceiving that He had answered them well, asked Him, "Which is the first commandment of all?"**

Saints, this discussion continued within the Temple courts. Jesus and the disciples were surrounded by a crowd of people, while various groups of religious leaders came and went with their questions. This time, however, a Pharisee, brought a sincere question:

**“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”**

**T**he reference to “the commandments” focused on a popular debate about the “more important” and “less important” of the hundreds of laws the Jews had accumulated.

The Pharisees had classified over six hundred laws and spent much time discussing which laws were weightier than others. As a Pharisee himself, the man had in mind the debates over the relative importance of ritual, ethical, moral, and ceremonial laws, as well as the positive versus negative laws. Jesus’ definitive answer about the resurrection caused this man to hope he might also have the final answer about all these laws. He wouldn’t be disappointed.

**29 Jesus answered him, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. 30'And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' This is the first commandment.**

Saints, among all the Gospel writers, only Mark recorded Jesus’ quote from Deuteronomy 6:4, which is the first part of what the Jews know as the Shema (referring to the opening word of the sentence in Hebrew). The Shema is made up from

**Deuteronomy 6:4-9**

4 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! 5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. 6 "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart.

7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Saints, it’s the major creed of Judaism that was recited twice daily (morning and evening) by devout Jews. The teachers of the law could debate all they wanted, but Jesus brought them back to the basics by giving new life to the oft-repeated words, The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. What mattered were not laws and their relative importance; what mattered was a relationship with the one true God.

Jesus then answered the man’s question by explaining what those words should mean in the daily lives of the Jews.

Because they believed that there was one God (as opposed to other religions, such as the Romans with their pantheon of gods), they ought to love the one true God with every part of their being: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength” (see also Deuteronomy 6:5). A person’s total being must be involved in loving God. To love God in this way is to fulfill completely all the commandments regarding one’s “vertical” relationship.

**31 And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."**

Saints, in addition to the law quoted in 12:30, there is a second and equally important law. This law focuses on “horizontal” relationships—our dealings with fellow human beings. A person cannot maintain a good vertical relationship with God (loving God) without also caring for his or her neighbor.

**Matthew 22:34-37**

34 But when the Pharisees heard that He had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, 36 "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

For this second law, Jesus quoted Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

**Matthew 22:38-40**

38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

The word “neighbor” refers to fellow human beings in general. The love a person has for himself or herself (in the sense of looking out for oneself, caring about best interests, etc.) should be continued, but it should also be directed toward others.

The Ten Commandments and all the other Old Testament laws are summarized in these two laws. By fulfilling these two commands to love God totally and love others as oneself, a person will keep all the other commands.

**32 So the scribe said to Him, "Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth, for there is one God, and there is no other but He. 33 And to love Him with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."**

Saints, the man commended Jesus for his true and insightful answer. The man realized that after all the Pharisees’ wrangling about the laws, the answer had been amazingly simple. The man reaffirmed the Shema quoted from Deuteronomy, saying, “There is only one God.” He then added, “and no other,” echoing

**Deuteronomy 4:35**

“To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD Himself is God; there is none other besides Him”

**Exodus 8:10**

So he said, "Tomorrow." And he said, "Let it be according to your word, that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God.

**Isaiah 45:21**

Tell and bring forth your case; Yes, let them take counsel together. Who has declared this from ancient time? Who has told it from that time? Have not I, the LORD? And there is no other God besides Me, A just God and a Savior; There is none besides Me.

This man understood that the laws of love for God and love for neighbor were more important than all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law. In other words, love was more important than all the ritual and ceremonial laws.

This man, one of the few among the Pharisees, was able to see that loving God with all one’s heart, understanding (substituted for “mind”), and strength, and to love one’s neighbors revealed a level of love and obedience that went far beyond the offering of sacrifices.

**34 Now when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." But after that no one dared question Him.**

Saints, Jesus was pleased by the man’s response and told him that he was not far from the Kingdom of God. This man had caught the intent of God’s law as it is so often stressed in the Old Testament—that true obedience comes from the heart. Because the Old Testament commands lead to Christ, the man’s next step toward obtaining God’s Kingdom was faith in Jesus himself. This, however, was the most difficult step to take.The questions ended, for no one dared to ask any more. But this did not end the opposition. The leaders continued in their plot to kill Jesus.

**35 Then Jesus answered and said, while He taught in the temple, "How is it that the scribes say that the Christ is the Son of David?**

Saints, this was still Tuesday of Jesus’ final week, and he was teaching in the Temple. The Pharisees expected a Messiah (the Christ, the Anointed One), but they erroneously thought he would be only a human ruler who would reign on King David’s throne,

deliver them from Gentile domination by establishing God’s rule on earth, and restore Israel’s greatness as in the days of David and Solomon. They knew that the Messiah would be a son (descendant) of David, but they did not understand that he would be more than a human descendant—he would be God in the flesh.

**36 For David himself said by the Holy Spirit: 'The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." '**

Saints, the Jews and early Christians knew the Old Testament was inspired by God, bearing his authority in its teachings. Jesus quoted

**Psalm 110:1**

“The LORD said to my Lord, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."

It was to show that David, speaking under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, understood the Messiah to be his Lord (that is, one who had authority over him), not just his descendant.

The Messiah would be a human descendant of David, but he would also be God’s divine Son. That he sits at God’s right hand means the Messiah will sit in the place of highest honor and authority in God’s coming Kingdom. In ancient royal courts, the right side of the king’s throne was reserved for the person who could act in the king’s place. The picture of enemies humbled beneath his feet describes the final conquering of sin and evil.

**37 "Therefore David himself calls Him 'Lord'; how is He then his Son?" And the common people heard Him gladly.**

Saints, if the great King David himself called the coming Messiah his Lord in Psalms110:1, then how could he be merely David’s son (meaning “descendant”) at the same time? David himself didn’t think the Messiah would be just a descendant; instead, David, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, realized that the Messiah would be God in human form and would deserve due respect and honor.

**John 1:14**

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

**38 Then He said to them in His teaching, "Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, 39 the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts,**

Saints, this denunciation of the religious leaders (specifically the teachers of religious law) probably occurred right in the Temple and was spoken to the surrounding crowd that had been “listening to him with great interest”.

Matthew has an entire chapter of such denunciations—seven “woes” to the teachers of religious law and Pharisees whom Jesus unhesitatingly called “hypocrites” (Matthew 23). Mark recorded a shortened version, signaling Jesus’ final break with the religious leaders.

**Matthew 23:13-34**

13 But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. 14 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. Therefore you will receive greater condemnation.

15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. 16 Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the temple, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gold of the temple, he is obliged to perform it.'

17 "Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gold or the temple that sanctifies the gold? 18 And, 'Whoever swears by the altar, it is nothing; but whoever swears by the gift that is on it, he is obliged to perform it.' 19 "Fools and blind! For which is greater, the gift or the altar that sanctifies the gift? 20 Therefore he who swears by the altar, swears by it and by all things on it. 21 He who swears by the temple, swears by it and by Him who dwells in it.

22 And he who swears by heaven, swears by the throne of God and by Him who sits on it. 23 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. 24 Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!

25 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. 27 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.

28 Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. 29 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, 30 and say, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.'

31 "Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' guilt. 33 Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? 34 Therefore, indeed, I send you prophets, wise men, and scribes: some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogue!

Having silenced the questioning of the religious leaders, Jesus turned to the crowd and told them to beware of these men.

While they had education and authority, Jesus denounced their conduct. Their actions revealed their desire for attention and honor. They had lost sight of their priority as teachers of religious law and were enjoying their position merely because of the “perks” it offered. Jesus condemned this attitude.

**40 who devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation."**

Saints, not only did the teachers walk around expecting perks and honor, they also actively abused their position. Because they received no pay, they depended on the hospitality of devout Jews.

It was considered an act of piety for people to help these teachers. That they cheat widows out of their property was a vivid picture of these religious men using their position to defraud the gullible. Some people would even go so far as to place all their finances in the teacher’s control (especially widows who trusted them). As the nation’s lawyers, these men were often employed in handling the money a widow received from her father’s dowry.

Some abused their trusted positions by unethically obtaining the dowry for the Temple and then keeping it themselves. They were in a position to exploit people, cheating the poor out of everything they had and taking advantage of the rich. How could they deserve anything but punishment!

**41 Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much.**

Saints, Jesus completed his teaching and sat in the area of the Temple called the Court of Women.

The treasury was located there or in an adjoining walkway. In this area were seven collection boxes in which worshipers could deposit their Temple tax and six boxes for freewill offerings. From his vantage point, Jesus watched as the crowds dropped in their money.

A lot of money came into the Temple treasury during Passover; the increased crowds meant increased money amounts in the coffers. Surely the large amounts from the rich people clattered loudly into the boxes.

**42 Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans.**

Saints, in contrast, a poor widow came with a freewill offering (that is, she was not paying a required tax, but rather giving a gift). As a widow, she had few resources for making money. If a widow in New Testament times had no sons, no protector, and remained unmarried, she was often destitute. Since there was no social security or public aid for widows, a widow would often be without financial support. This widow’s offering totaled only two pennies. Her small gift was a sacrifice, but she gave it willingly.

**43 So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; 44 for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood."**

**In Closing:**

Saints, Jesus seized the opportunity to teach his disciples an important lesson in giving.

In Jesus’ eyes, the poor widow had given more than all the others—even the rich people who had contributed large amounts to the treasury. Though her gift was by far the smallest in monetary value, it was the greatest in sacrifice. The value of a gift is not determined by its amount, but by the spirit in which it is given.

The rich had given a tiny part of their surplus, but she had given everything, trusting God to care for her. Jesus wanted the disciples to see this lesson in total surrender of self, commitment to God, and willingness to trust in his provision.

Several disciples chose that moment to ask two curious questions: When will these things happen? What will be the sign? With his answers, Jesus prepared his disciples for the difficult years ahead.

He warned them about false messiahs, natural disasters, and persecutions. But he also assured them that he would be with them to protect them and make his Kingdom known through them. Jesus promised that, in the end, he would return in power and glory to save them.

**Let’s Pray**

**Benediction**

**"May The LORD bless you and keep you, May The LORD make His face shine upon you, May The LORD be gracious to you, May The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you His (Shalom) peace.” In Jesus Name!**