

**October 29, 2017**

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**Scripture: Matthew 22: 34-46 NRSV**

In our story there are two groups of Jewish people who have come to ask Jesus questions. They think that they can trap him. They think that Jesus is some sort of false prophet and are doing their best to undermine him. So they come to him and ask:

<sup>36</sup> “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Now there are many laws in the Jewish faith...a couple of weeks ago we had a video on the Exodus and saw that God had made a covenant...a promise with the people of Israel and had given the people a list of laws. The book of Leviticus is a book filled with laws that build upon laws from Exodus in detail. Many of these laws continue to be followed by the Jewish people today, although some today are considered to be barbaric and outdated...and some have been modified to reflect the culture, but they are the basis of the Jewish faith and originated with the ancient Israelites. So, representatives of the Sadducees and the Pharisees, two Jewish sects have come to see how much Jesus really knows about Jewish law. They want to find out what this man Jesus really knows...so Jesus responds with something that is both simple and yet profound:

*‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ and ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*

These religious leaders know that Jesus is both summarizing the law and referencing ancient Jewish law from Leviticus. Two of which are:

*<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord*

*<sup>34</sup> The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.*

On October 17, Nobleton and Schomberg along with four other churches hosted an interfaith dialogue at Tottenham United. We had a Muslim Imam visit and offer a presentation and lead a discussion about the Islamic faith. An Imam is what we would understand to be the equivalent of a priest or minister in the Christian faith. Omar the Imam, is not really an alien...he was born and raised in Toronto, and with the exception of a period of time where he studied abroad, Canada is the only home he has had...and yet for some of us Omar and other people of Muslim faith seem like aliens, because what they believe and how they live is unfamiliar to us. Many of the people here grew up in communities where the majority of people were White Anglo Saxon Protestants...I certainly did growing up in Orangeville during the 1970's and 80's but our communities, and neighbourhoods are changing and so must we.

Love your neighbour as yourself...how do you want to be treated? How do you want to be loved? For someone like Omar it comes in the form of our willingness to hear and learn from him. It comes in the form of not judging him because he dresses differently or has different customs. Loving him comes in the form of understanding that in all groups of faith there are good and bad people and the bad generally represent a small minority, not the majority. Loving means we are open to learn from each other and find the similarities between us.

After Omar's presentation in Tottenham, one of the comments I heard was "I had no idea how much we had in common." Islam, based on the teachings of the prophet Mohammad, "Peace be upon him," are rooted in the same faith as Christianity. It originates with Adam and the covenant with Abraham and with Moses. Some of their laws and customs are not so different than those found in Leviticus. They respect the teachings of Jesus and their entire lives are centred on loving God...Allah... with all their hearts and minds and loving neighbours through works of charity and peace.

So we know the Jews and Muslims both historically and today have many laws and rules to follow. Each one for them helps them to solidify their relationship with God. As Christians we are also connected to the ancient Laws of Israel. The teachings of Jesus were based in the ancient laws given to the Israelites and in his Sermon on the mount he tells the people that he did not come to abolish the Law no he came to fulfill them. These laws were important...but what does Jesus mean by fulfilling the law. Jesus takes it a step further and teaches that what is important about these laws isn't that they are strictly kept, but his fulfilling of the law comes through a new understanding of them. An understanding that it is the intentions behind the law that holds most importance. Laws were not given as means of restriction, but as a means for the people to love God and love others. The Israelites needed strict instructions on how this love could be lived out in their everyday lives. Jesus teaches to look beyond and understand why our intentions are the most important part of

I recently started watching a series on Netflix called the "Good Place" The premise of the show is that after a young women dies she goes to a community

called “The Good Place” not exactly heaven, but a nice community of other good people with who you live after you die. The main character realizes immediately that a mistake has been made because on earth she has was not at all a nice person...she realizes that her actions should have landed her in what is called the bad place. She meets someone who is has dedicated himself to the study of ethics and throughout the first season he tries to teach her how to become a good person. Another person she meets in the Good Place is a woman who when alive had raised billions of dollars for charities...she had helped literally thousands of people around the world, so on the surface she seems to be one of the very good people in this good place. By the end of the first season we discover that neither of the women really belong in the Good Place...not the one who was horrible on earth or the one dedicated her life to fundraising for charities, because neither were motivated to do good...the woman who raised all of the money for charities wasn't motivated by trying to help other people but for the purpose of trying to make herself look good. Getting to the good place was not as much about what people did on earth but why they did it.

Jesus did not come to abolish the laws because it is not the laws themselves that were the problem. I think that what Jesus was trying to teach about the law is that it is not the following of the laws which is most important, but it is the reason behind them being followed that holds the real key. What we do should be based in a desire to love God and to love others completely. What we do should not be about what we get in return ...the laws are not there in place so we can compare with each other as to who is following them the best...or to see who can do it better but instead we must ask ourselves, “have our actions been for the sake of loving God and others without consideration of what we get out of it?”

This is where I differ with some other Christian thinkers who believe that we need to follow Christ as a means to get heaven...no I follow Christ because Christ was the example of what it means to live a selfless life...one that loves God and loves neighbour as oneself. I try to follow this example not because of what I get out of it, but because, I believe we were created out of love...to love.

So one of the ways we can do that today is learn about the faith, customs and rituals of other people's faith and we can work to discover where there are similarities and how we can respect our differences. We can learn to understand that others may follow laws to honour God for reasons that may seem different to us but are understandable, and meaningful to them. And we do this not to get anything out of it but merely for the knowledge that we are loving others in the exact way that we would want others to love us...in the way that God calls us to love each other.

Sometimes I think we make God way more complicated than we need to. I think that Jesus was trying to say it doesn't need to be so complicated...it is simple...love God...love others...that's it. Perhaps it is best said in the prophetic words of the Beatles...All We Need is Love.

Amen.