



northminster presbyterian church

2400 old alabama road  
roswell, georgia 30076

05-Nov-2006

**SCRIPTURE: Deuteronomy 6:1-9 Mark 12:28-34**

**SERMON: The Goalden Rule (Rev. Dr. Jim Simpson)**

Often times in Mark's Gospel religious leaders question Jesus in order to trip him up; to make their own point; to catch Jesus out; to prove Jesus wrong; to stir up some real or imagined controversy. Just read the earlier sections in Chapter 12! Jesus relates a parable about the Watergate Vineyard, an indictment of the failed religious leaders, and they get the message and send in the attack dogs! It reads a lot like our current political season; the first question posed to Jesus is about taxation policy. Should we pay taxes to Caesar? In a clever retort backed up by a PowerPoint presentation on 1st Century Judean coinage, Jesus asserts that what is more important than what we give to Caesar *is what it is we give to God!* This from the Pharisees and the Herodians... a group of folks in hick to the Roman army of occupation!

There then follows a question about marriage; an unlikely tale, a tale worthy of M. Night Shyamalan - a horror story of sorts: seven brothers who all end up marrying the same woman, one after the other. She must have owned the Jerusalem franchise for anti-freeze! This quite remarkable woman sees off all her husbands. She outlasts them all, she survives the craziness of seven husbands. She deserves a medal, but instead the question posed to Jesus is, "Whose wife will she be in heaven?" All this from the Saducees, a group of theologians who had long ago given up on any belief in the after-life!

In the section we read today however, the scribe who questions Jesus does not ask a tired old trick question of such vein as, "If God created Adam and Eve, who created God?" or "How many angels can balance on the head of a pin?" Nor is he motivated it seems by anything other than the desire to understand who Jesus was and what it was Jesus was teaching! No, this man has a much better attitude. Specifically he wants to know Jesus' position on the fundamentals. He asks about the basics, the foundation on which faith can be built. And unlike the Jeopardy replies that Jesus so often gives, answering a question or a statement with a question, this time Jesus speaks very succinctly and clearly.

The answer Jesus provides would likely have confused His more hostile questioners because it is a surprisingly orthodox answer for its time. Many Jewish texts repeat the formula that the fundamentals are: God is one, love God, and love your neighbor. But this was Jesus' answer, not destined to make the headlines in the Jerusalem Theological Journal of Post-Modern Apocalyptic Existentialism, but a straight forward, no nonsense Declaration of Faith: *Love God, Love your neighbor!* Such a belief is the best beginning for any proper understanding of the Jewish faith. *Love God, Love your neighbor* is what the Hebrew Scriptures are all about. Love God, Love your neighbor and don't separate the two is the standard to which Israel is called by all its prophets, *including Jesus!* Love God, love your neighbor is the message Jesus will live and proclaim.

In the midst of a culture crowded with all kinds of gods, Judaism was distinctive in its insistence that God was one. In community, the followers of Judaism remained faithful to this belief, and practiced care for the orphan, the widow, and the destitute. This two fold love: love for God, *the one God*, and love for the needy define the purpose and indeed the continued existence of this community.

It is no surprise then when the scribe concurs with Jesus. We can imagine the wheels turning in his head, saying to himself, "From what I had been told this guy, Jesus was a heretic and yet when I hear him speak, he upholds the very foundations of our faith! What is all the fuss about?"

The fuss, of course, was that Jesus was deaf and blind to class, deaf and blind to gender, deaf and blind to religious, social and ethnic boundaries. Jesus actually believed and lived this teaching, these commands, that loving God meant that that all human beings, *all human beings*, were his neighbors. This belief set Jesus apart from and extended the truth of His Jewish faith, and eventually it would be this very belief and Jesus' living of it that would see Jesus nailed to a cross.

It is helpful in facing such an incident to see Jesus as standing firmly rooted in the prophetic Jewish tradition; a tradition that was not about being private and exclusive, but was all about *community!* Jesus was always with people, only rarely did Jesus take Himself off on His own. Whenever Jesus traveled, people would accompany Him. Wherever Jesus entered into a town or a village, people gathered to be close to Jesus. Jesus was a Jewish prophet before Jesus was a Christian prophet. Jesus was all about discovering the presence of God in community. Jesus, Immanuel, God with us, moves beyond burnt-offerings and sacrifices, the rituals of that time, to the very heart of faith: *loving God and loving others*. Still today, Jesus the prophet, as well as Jesus the Lord, comes to us and any who seek to claim or declare faith, saying that real believing must take us past any and all of the rituals of our faith; *to the heart of loving God with all our passion and prayer and intelligence and energy and loving our neighbor as well as we love ourselves*.

*We are to love God with all of our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind, and with all our strength.*

*We are to love God with all our HEART*, we are to love with our feelings and with feeling, but we are also to love from the heart: the very seat of our identity. Made in the image of God, created by God, our lives held by God, we are to love God with and in every fiber of who we are.

*We are to love God with all our SOUL*, with who we are as spiritual beings. Designed to best live and function in partnership with God, we are to seek always to live with an open sense of constant, conscious contact with God.

*We are to love God with all our MIND*, with our minds, with *all* our minds. Our thoughts, attitudes and thinking patterns are shaped by love of God and love for God, leading to the ability to be transformed: seeing and glimpsing our understanding of God and acting upon what we have learned.

*We are to love God with all our STRENGTH*, the strength of our physical being, to be there for God physically present and available to God. To be with God in the same way as when we say to someone whom we love, "I will be there for you; I am here for you!" As they struggle, you become physically present for that person; in the doctor's office, in the recovery room, at the funeral home, in the courtroom. To be there for God is to be God's person in the world around you.

Many of us might ask, "How can we not love God, after all that God has done and given to us?" We affirm that we wouldn't be alive and here today if it weren't for God! We identify God as the *One* who brings us beauty of this and every day, who shares with us the gracious love given in Jesus Christ! *Why would we not want to love God with everything we have?* And yet.... we know just how easily swayed we are, and tempted and twisted and stubborn, just how quickly our attention wanders on to other things, how often our focus shifts from big "G" God to other small "g" gods!

Loving God in such a way requires that we love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Loving God utterly, inevitably throws us together with other people whom we are required to embrace lovingly. Loving God totally and completely requires that we love all of God's creation... yes, even the Yellow Jackets and the Bulldogs and the fetid Buckeyes and the rest and them all! And remember that when Jesus was asked to define whom He thought of as His neighbor, Jesus told a story identifying the Samaritan, the outsider, the outcast, the despised, the one normally profiled at the airport, the alien in our midst, as our neighbor.

This sermon will in fact only conclude today when you get home. When you get home, I invite you to search around your home for the doors, of any and every size and shape. As you identify each door, look and see how many hinges it has. Your mission, if you choose to accept it: In the next ten seconds, see if you can find any door that has only one hinge!

Why hinges you ask? Why doors? Well I want to hold onto the experience of this day: that Jesus in these verses has opened up a door for all of us *to the very center of what it means to live our faith*. By the *DOING* of these commands, we are taken to the very heart and soul of the life we are being asked to live! I suggest to you that these two commands: Love God, Love your Neighbor are the *two hinges* that balance the door through which we are asked to walk in faith and obedience.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul and you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself. We call this the golden rule in the sense that it is of greatest value. It is also the slightly mis-spelled *goalden* rule because here is the true focus, the correct aim, the proper trajectory for our lives - our goal: *Loving God and Loving our Neighbor!* **Amen.**

---

#### **Deuteronomy 6:1-9**

1Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, 2so that you and your children and your children’s children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. 3Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you. 4Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. 5You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. 6Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. 7Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. 8Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, 9and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

#### **Mark 12:28-34**

28One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” 29Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” 32Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; 33and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’ —this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

*The New Revised Standard Version, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.*