

## SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

# The Greatest

Nineteenth Sunday After Pentecost

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The Rev. Dr. Mario Gonzalez del Solar

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Richmond VA

Matthew 22:34-46

**W**hen the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup> and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" <sup>37</sup> He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." <sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' <sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the Prophets." <sup>41</sup> Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: <sup>42</sup> "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." <sup>43</sup> He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, <sup>44</sup> 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? <sup>45</sup> If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" <sup>46</sup> No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Human beings have an obsession with ranking things. I found a website the other day that consists completely of lists of the "10 greatest" in hundreds of categories: the 10 greatest guitar players of all time, the 10 greatest inventors of all time, the 10 greatest generals in Western history, the 10 greatest blunders of World War II. You name a category of interest, and there's probably a list of the 10 greatest or the 10 worst.

What motivates a person to compile a list of the 10 greatest female athletes or the 10 greatest composers is their intense interest in sports or music or whatever the subject matter may be. There's a challenge in assigning a value to each item in a category from 10 down to 1, and who or what should be number 1, "the greatest," is usually the subject of furious debate.

To say that the Pharisees were intensely interested in the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Bible, would be an understatement. They studied it night and day and did their utmost to apply it to every aspect of life, no matter how tiny or trivial. When they asked Jesus, “which commandment in the Law is the greatest?” they weren’t asking for his “top 10.” They had identified 613 separate commandments: 365 negative and 248 positive. They were challenging Jesus to narrow them down to one: “the greatest.” No doubt this was a constant topic of debate among experts in the Law of Moses.

To us, keeping track of negative commandments like not sowing different kinds of seed in the same field or positive commandments like making sure you are ritually clean by avoiding contact with weasels, mice, three species of lizard, geckos, crocodiles, and chameleons (Leviticus 11:29) seems maddeningly trivial. But for the Pharisees it was vital to carefully consider each commandment because each commandment described a duty to God that must be performed. The Pharisees were focused on the Law of Moses because they believed it prescribed one’s duty to God and one’s neighbor down to the smallest detail.

But as we all know, when we have duties laid down for us, we need to know how far those duties and responsibilities go. For example, Exodus 16:29 commands that a person not leave their residence on the Sabbath. It prescribes a negative duty—don’t leave home on the Sabbath. It restricts one’s activity. Naturally, the question arose: “What exactly does it mean to “leave your residence?” By a painstaking analysis of Scripture the rabbis decided it meant you could walk no more than 2,000 cubits (about a half mile) from your home on a Sabbath: a “Sabbath day’s journey.” Your restrictive duty not to leave had 2,000 cubits worth of elastic in it. But some stretched that elastic farther. They allowed a person to go out to the 2,000 cubit limit the day before the Sabbath and leave a lunch there. When you walked out to the limit on the Sabbath and ate lunch, that spot became your residence, and you could walk another 2,000 cubits. Your duty became less restrictive. This is how seeing life as specific duties to God works out.

In this contrast between the Pharisees’ question and Jesus’ response we see how defective living by duty becomes when confronted by God himself in Jesus. The problem with duty is that ultimately it focuses not on God, or even on God’s commandments, but on me. It makes me ask, “What is *my* duty?” I want to know exactly what it is. “What is *my* responsibility?” I want to know exactly how much is required of me. “How is *my* performance?” I want to know these things to minimize my responsibility so I can maximize how well I perform my duty.

Rather than narrowing the 613 commandments down to one, Jesus validates them all, as well as the rest of the Old Testament, when he responds with what we call “the summary of the Law”: “**You shall love the Lord your God**

**with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment.<sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the Prophets.”** He quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. All the Law, says Jesus, as well as the Prophets “hang”—that is, depend—on these two commandments.

Then Jesus asks them his own version of a question about “the greatest.” What is their learned opinion on the ancestry of the Messiah, the Savior, the one God would send to rescue his people? The unanimous verdict was that he was to be the son of David. Quoting from Psalm 110, Jesus asks them, **“How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,<sup>44</sup> ‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”?’<sup>45</sup> If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”** Jesus points to three people in this Psalm: David, the author; God; and the Messiah, whom David calls his Lord, and to whom God says he will sit at God’s right hand.

To the Pharisees it was inconceivable that David could address a mere descendant as **“my Lord.”** David was the ideal of the perfect king of Israel. But Jesus points out that he does just that. And he’s referring to himself in the third person—the Messiah. David was great, but Jesus is the greatest king. In the words of the hymn, Jesus is “great David’s greater Son.” He is the Lord’s anointed, the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior. He is the greatest Person, to whom the Law and the Prophets point.

The Pharisees ask Jesus for the greatest commandment, because they want to know their greatest duty for their own purposes. But Jesus refers them instead to the greatest Person. Not the greatest singer or the greatest author, but the greatest of all persons: God himself and his eternal Son. In Jesus’ response we see God’s perspective on humankind’s relationship with him. He provides the Law and the Prophets primarily to guide us to himself, the greatest Person there is, to have the greatest relationship there is with him, and to be loved and to love with the greatest love there is.

Jesus, the Messiah is the greatest human person because he is also the greatest Person possible—God himself. He humbled himself and entered the human race voluntarily. He came for one purpose: to restore people to relationship with the greatest Person, God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He did it in obedience to the Father, not out of duty. His obedience consisted in his having to overcome the weakness of our human nature in submitting to the terrible suffering and death of the cross. But his obedience was out of love for his Father and for us.

For no reason except that he loved us, he took upon himself all the consequences for our sins. This is the greatest love. Jesus said so himself: **“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.” (John 15:13)** Jesus is the Son of God, the greatest Person there is, who calls us into the greatest relationship there is with the greatest love there is.

Today we're going to baptize two little baby girls, Evelyn Virginia Harrison and Mary Cate Mcpherson. Everybody loves babies. They're so new, so fresh and unspoiled. They have no past to speak of, only a future full of bright potential. We love to watch them change and develop their own little personalities and preferences as they grow into “real people”.

“Real people” are the signature of the greatest Person there is. His image and likeness is unmistakable in every little baby. We get hints of the greatest relationship in the love relations of parents and children, of husbands and wives, of families and friends. And we see hints of the greatest love when parents lay down their lives for their children, husbands for wives, wives for husbands, and Christ's people one for another.

God, the greatest Person, calls us not to duty, but into the greatest relationship: the relationship with himself, through the greatest love, the love of his Son Jesus the Messiah for lost sinners. As the Apostle John reminds us, **“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup> God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:8-10)**

Love isn't a duty, what we should do. It's who God is. That doesn't mean that love is easy. To the contrary, it can be agonizingly difficult. It was for Jesus. But that's what makes it love. Think of Jesus: with no thought to himself, the greatest Person endured horrible death on the cross for you and for me out of his sheer and complete love for us. Today we baptize Evelyn Virginia and Mary Cate into that greatest person, who offers us the greatest relationship whose source is the greatest love. I pray that what we do here this morning will remind us all of how great our Lord Jesus Christ is, and how deep his love for us is. I pray that this greatest Person will move each of us to love one another and to love those who don't know him by sharing this most difficult but greatest love by inviting them into relationship with Jesus.

Let us pray.