

“God the Person”

Reading: Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22:34-46

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I've mentioned before that I love technology and the internet and the many wonderful things they make possible today, but even the most devoted apologist for the internet must admit that there are times when it seems as though the internet functions as one gigantic machine built for the purpose of perfecting arguments. If you make the mistake of reading through the conversations attached to almost any article on the internet, you'll find all kinds of people arguing about almost anything (or, more likely, nothing at all). I've even found long-winded arguments for the existence or nonexistence of God hidden in the comments for random items on Amazon that have absolutely no theological qualities to them. It makes you wonder where all these people are who apparently have so much time on their hands that they do nothing but argue with people they've never met. And one of the frustrating things is that so few of those arguments go anywhere at all: no one ever convinces anyone; they just go round and round and round.

Of course this is nothing really new. People have probably always argued about everything; it's something we're innately good at. But sometimes you come across someone who really does get the final word, someone whose logic and knowledge and rhetorical skills are such that their opponents are left speechless. It seems like it doesn't happen nearly often enough, but from time to time...

That's what happens today in our reading from Matthew. For us today, it seems absurd that someone would argue so fiercely against Jesus, because after all, He's *Jesus*. But during His ministry, there were of course serious questions as to who and what He was. He faced opposition all throughout His ministry, but we see that opposition especially concentrated in this portion of the gospel story, when Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem shortly before He was crucified. There are several events during that week that we celebrate during Holy Week before Good Friday and Easter, but for much of the week, Jesus spent His time teaching and debating with the religious leaders in the city.

They argue about a lot of things. They test Him and try to trap Him, and He in turn tells parables that usually have these religious leaders as their objects. They deal with political issues, issues that we're still hashing out in our culture today, of what the relationship is between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of humanity. They ask whether it's right to pay taxes to Caesar, hoping that this radical, troublesome preacher will say something treasonous so they can accuse Him. They ask Him by whose authority He does the things He does, hoping to trap Him in a theological sticky wicket, thinking that whatever answer He gives will get Him in trouble with someone, but He outwits them. They try a question about the mechanics of the resurrection of the dead, again relying on a theological dispute to try to force Him to pick sides in their political struggle.

You almost wonder how long they would keep it up if they could, because let's face it, people have no end of excuses and arguments against Jesus. But Jesus cuts them short. It doesn't happen very often, even with all of our experience arguing on the internet: Jesus says something so powerful and so unexpected that His opponents are left speechless. “No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

It's prompted by another theological challenge. The question about resurrection came from the Sadducees, one of the political-theological sects of the day, but Jesus silenced them. The Pharisees, their opponents in some regards, take up the fight by asking Jesus what the greatest commandment is. God had spoken to His people in the past and guided them in how to live with Him by giving them the Torah, the book of the Law that contained 613 individual commandments covering all sorts of things. Which of those 613 laws you choose as the most important is going to say an awful lot about how you understand God's instruction as a whole. And Jesus gives them a dual answer in some of the most famous words of the whole Bible: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

As is so often the case in an argument, no one is actually dealing with the root issues motivating the entire argument. We argue about all kinds of things, but rarely do we talk about what's really making us argue: the fact that I'm threatened by your position, or my need to show off and be valued, or my desire to gain honor by knocking you off your pedestal, or whatever. These disputants are bringing up all kinds of religious and political questions, but they're dancing around the real issue: who is God, and what sort of God is He, and what does God desire of us?

These are some of the fundamental questions of existence. The way you answer them will determine an awful lot about how you live the rest of your life, if you're a thinking person. They're questions at the root of many of our most pressing issues even today. Does some sort of God exist? However we answer that question will tell us a lot about the nature of the world. If God does exist, what *sort* of God exists? Is God distant or approachable? What is God's relationship to the universe, and more specifically, how does God relate to us, if at all? What sorts of things does God care about, or is God so alien to us that we can't even begin to understand God's motivations? How we answer those questions tells us a lot about whether the universe has a purpose or a goal, and whether we have a purpose, and what morality ought to look like, and how we ought to behave and live our lives and relate to one another and creation. Depending on the sort of God that exists, it may be that we are all perfectly justified in living however we please, because life is nasty, brutish, and short, and there is no reason. Maybe we should all eat, drink, and be merry, because death could come tomorrow and we might as well enjoy whatever we have.

These theological questions are some of the most important questions we ask, because they're not *just* theological questions; they cut to the very heart of reality. And whether you've asked them or not, they're still important to you, because you're living your life according to *someone's* theology, whether you've examined it or not, so you might as well do the hard work of thinking.

Jesus knows that these disputes with the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the teachers of the Law aren't really about paying taxes and the theology of the resurrection. He knows that the real issues at play are these deep questions about the nature of God, because Jesus' opponents are rejecting the vision of God He is offering them, and they're using all these other details as tools to try and trip Him up and discredit Him. And so He plays their game up to a point, but finally He cuts to the heart of the matter and silences them all.

Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, "'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under

your feet.” If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?” It’s not immediately obvious what He’s driving at here, but to these religious leaders who are so proud of their reliance on Scripture, Jesus is using an ancient psalm of David to point to the divinity of the foretold Messiah. These lines were taken to be a prophecy about the Messiah that would be sent by God, and it was attributed to King David. The line in question is, “The Lord (that is, God) said to *my Lord* (that is, the Messiah),” which Jesus is using to show that the Messiah is not merely a descendant of David, He is also greater than David because He is the Son of God. He’s not merely a Davidic Messiah, He’s also a divine Messiah.

This is what silences Jesus’ opponents. He has used Scripture, which they would accept, to make a case for something they can’t accept. He’s cut their arguments off at the knees, because they keep coming to Him with these peripheral issues when in fact what matters is what sort of God exists and how He relates to us. How does God speak to us, and how does He want us to act? You can argue about which commandment outranks all the others, but the goal of the Law was not to point you to itself, the goal was to point you to God. God didn’t give instructions so that we could debate their meaning, He gave us instructions so that we could know Him. Be holy not because I told you so, but be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy. Be holy not because of some abstract set of commandments, but because holiness is the character of God, and you relate to God as His people, and He wants you to be like Him. And the second commandment is *like it*: love your neighbor as yourself; there is a continuity of relationship.

Jesus is silencing them with a profound claim about who God is and what God is like: they’re interested in spending all their time talking *about* God in abstract debates, when Jesus is showing them that the greater truth is that God Himself is standing right in front of them as a concrete, incarnate reality. Stop worrying so much about God’s laws, though they’re important, and focus on the greater reality that God is present in the person of Jesus, and His character and His concerns and His motivations have been revealed to you as one who proclaims good news to the poor and uplifts the downtrodden and offers redemption to the lost and gives hope to the hopeless and delivers the oppressed. That reality of the person of God revealed in Jesus is much more potent and present than any abstract argument about God’s commandments.

In the kingdom of Jesus Christ, the question of what God wants us to do — that is, His law — is a meaningless question until you first know God as a person. He is not an abstract force, He is not a distant lawgiver, He is not an absent creator, He is a present, loving, powerful God who calls us to walk with Him and know Him and be like Him. When we have a hard time getting close to God as a person we’re tempted to settle for the other things, the littler things of God that are not God Himself. We fuss over trivia and following laws and empty prayers and empty rituals, and none of those things has meaning without the true person of God in Jesus Christ.

Pastor Carey and I have a stack of books and materials on marriage that we’ve received over the years. I can’t claim to have read them all, but there are some of them that we do make use of in marriage counseling from time to time, and occasionally we even use them on each other. But even if I had read and memorized every book on marriage that I could get my hands on, I would be a fool to expect Pastor Carey to always respond exactly like the books say. I might follow the book to the letter sometime when it comes to some conflict we’re having, and if the book doesn’t work, I can’t get upset at Pastor Carey for not doing what the book said she should. She’s a person, and people must

be known as they are apart from the law. The same could be said for children, or friends, or anyone, really: a person must be known as they are apart from our expectations of them or our abstractions of them.

“Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy,” because you know who I am and I know you and you walk in my ways. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” because this is my character. See God as He is, in this God-Man Jesus, this incarnate Word, this one who has come near to us to show us who He is. It is a claim that can silence debate; it can leave those speechless who cannot conceive of such a God. A distant, silent, powerless God is no threat to anyone. A God who remains so far away that we cannot know Him is easily ignored. A God who merely makes commands for us to follow, while we may have to follow His commands, is not a God that we need to know or love. But a God who comes near, who has a face, who breathes our air and interferes with our politics and embraces our poor and walks on our roads and then calls us to follow Him, that sort of God is a challenge.

Which God are you following today? Does He truly have an impact on your whole life? Do you know Him as a person, as He is, as revealed in Jesus Christ, or is He merely an idea? God has drawn near to you in Jesus Christ. Draw near to Him.

Benediction: Go and love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Go and love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.



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