

St Pius & St Anthony Homily 30th Sunday Ordinary Year A1

Jesus is asked “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” We might ask, “What is so much **a test** (22:35) about that?” Sounds innocent enough. But Matthew opens here with the detail that (Matt 22:34-35) “*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them a scholar of the law **tested him...***” I emphasized last week that this is the third attack from different groups coming at Jesus with a ‘Stump the Chumps’ question (*like from the segment of the radio show for car mechanics called ‘Click & Clack’*). The question is meant to get the person on record in a bad light (for criticism later). So, what is so ‘testy’ about this question? Well, it is a ‘summarizing’ or ‘reductive’ question, whose answer risks being accused of ‘watering down’ or compromising some serious truth. This type question was actually popular around the time of Jesus. I ran across a story from the Jewish Talmud, about two popular rabbis contemporary to Jesus time period called Shammai (*died about 30 CE*) and Hillel (*died about 10 CE*), in which they were asked by a person wishing to convert to Judaism, “Can you teach me the Torah while standing on one foot?” It is kind of an awkward question but the point was that the teacher had to be brief (who wants to stand on one foot very long). So, the student basically asks what is most important to know in Jewish doctrine -Torah. What has to be included and what could be left out. The downside or **test-trick** in responding to such a question, is that the answer is going to be minimalist (what is going to be glossed over-left out). Once you isolate the most important part of law, does that legitimate-excuse ignoring the rest of the law. If we highlight one thing above others, what about the rest of it?

For example, had Jesus answered the question saying something like, “Most Important - You must observe the Sabbath, light the candle & offer prayers at synagogue.” But what about all other days or customs? After Jesus might say this, could someone run off and accuse Him of ignoring the Temple & High Holy Days, or even that He preached against the Temple (‘How dare you not say a word about importance of Temple!’). Now what? Once we identify ‘the greatest part’, might that justify ignoring the rest of it? That was the dilemma.

Here’s a practical breakdown of this dilemma. One time some years ago, in a parish that I served, something came up during mass, a message was given me, and I had to run to hospital immediately afterward. I said to someone, “Could you

close up church afterward- I have to run?” They asked, “What’s involved-what do I have to do?” I said, “For sure, lock the building.” So, we can imagine that when I came back, every light in the church was still on, everything used was still out, and worst of all, the candles were still lit! (Don’t get me wrong, I was still so grateful-I had to go.) But because of focusing on the ‘door-locking’, it distracted them from observing everything else involved in the normal closing up process.

And that is an innocent version of this dilemma. Another example that captures more of the cynical spirit of the Pharisees, happened maybe a time or two when I was a kid. Dad might give us kids a job, to mow the yard while he was at work. Then he comes home, and sees the gas can in driveway, clippings blown all over the front porch doorway and the mower still sitting out. He reprimanded us saying, “I thought I said mow the yard while I was gone.” We replied (but not cute) “We did cut the grass.” Since it wasn’t completely spelled out, then we saw that we didn’t have to do anything else. Of course, that didn’t fly. Or here’s another example. A homeowner told me one time how infuriated he was at his HVAC contractor. What happened was that one winter, his home’s outdoor heat pump furnace went out, so he called out a Heat/Air repair guy. He saw the van pull up, and then the van turned and left. He called, and the technician told him “I work on furnaces, I don’t shovel your snow down the sidewalk and clear off the six inches of snow on top of unit-- Call me when it is ready for repair! The owner didn’t call back. Well okay, he did call him....., something...., but not on the phone!

But notice how superbly Jesus handles this tricky question. He properly recites the actual First Commandment given to Moses on Mt Sinai -The Lord your God is One, there is no other (Exodus 20:2ff, and Deut 11:13 ff) – God alone is to be served with all one’s being-heart, mind, soul. The first and greatest, yet Jesus appends another: Be sure to acknowledge that image & likeness of God imprinted upon your neighbor’s soul (and your own soul). Love you neighbor as yourself. (Lv 19:18; Jas 2:8). Jesus is saying that if we acknowledge God above all properly, we also simultaneously must hold everything that God has created as precious to God, especially human beings. Then we will be following all of God’s commands. because that is everything. Nothing is left out, and Jesus cannot be accused of minimizing or leaving anything out. I like how Jesus’ answer here is similar to the tricky question parents get asked at times. “Who is your favorite child?” The wise parent responds, “All of them – each child is my favorite in his/her own way.”

Each is the greatest and special, not to be minimized. Similarly, Jesus slips through this 'catch-trap' question from the Pharisees. It is the 'Love of God'. If the love of God is in your heart, mind and soul. Then all the law has its place. Whichever law could be singled out, if you are genuinely Loving God and Loving Neighbor, then you will be abiding the law, faithfully following God's commands. Jesus' answer again is: Love God and Love Neighbor. And He adds, "The whole Law AND Prophets depend (hang upon) these two commands. (Matt 22:40)