

"Measure Twice, Cut Once!"
October 25, 2020

Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹and a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." ⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." ⁴³He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴ 'The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet"?"

⁴⁵If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" ⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

When I was in High School my father recruited me to help remodel an old house. We were putting up paneling and dad informed me that if you measure twice you only have to cut once. This is in fact good advice but I can measure something three times and come up with three different lengths for the same piece of wood. Did I mention we were remodeling an old house? More than once the measurements were correct for one point along the wall but the wall, floor and ceiling had a long time to become estranged from one another. My dad would put up the panel and say, "Don't worry, the trim will cover the gap." We came a point where I turned to him and said, "Dad, where are you going to find five inch trim?" He was a very patient man so I survived that interaction without injury. In new houses everything is nice and square. The floors are level and the walls are intact. Then time creeps in to unsettle things. Earth subsides. Water flows. Wind gets under the eaves. Or in some cases what seemed like a great idea in 1880 involving building in a grave yard proves a century and a half later to be like building your house upon the sand. The earth is a lot more fluid than our building materials allow.

“Measure Twice, Cut Once!”
October 25, 2020

The Bible often uses the image of a plumb line to indicate God’s judgement. The plumb line takes advantage of the fact that the center of the earth is a point halfway to China. A weight on a string will always hang down toward the center of the earth which is a good thing if you are trying to build a wall. Walls that aren’t aligned with the center of the earth don’t remain walls for long. The trouble is, the earth moves and the good wall goes bad. You can add some shoring up or take it down and reset the stones. If the wall is supporting an important building you might not be able to start over. In practice the plumb line tells you how out of line your wall is and gives you an idea how close to collapse it might be.

There is a bell tower in Pisa you may have heard of. In an attempt to keep it from falling over they lengthened pillars on one side as they built up, but alas the tower keeps on leaning. So far it has stood. Stabilizing it has taken some advanced engineering and so far it looks likely to stand for a while. They could have gone ahead and corrected the lean but the corrections during building the thing guarantee it would just lean the other way. What sort of measure can be useful in a world that so loves to thwart our best efforts to keep things nice and even? Yard sticks, micrometers, spirit levels mostly serve to indicate how far things are from where they ought to be.

This was the problem with the law of Moses. It is a good measure of what should be, but life keeps pushing against the rules. We need a rule of rules that allows for all the variation encountered in life. How do we know the right thing to do? Our ancestors thought they were doing it right, but look at some of the messes the world made of their best efforts.

“Measure Twice, Cut Once!”
October 25, 2020

There is a simple solution to this problem, a universal location device to tell you how well you are doing as you go about building your life. Love God, love your neighbor. It amazes me how many people are building with hatred as their guiding principle. Ignoring all the rules of lasting construction they are building that which is ugly, teetering and destabilized.

Perhaps you know the Sunday School song about the man who built his house upon the sand and how much fun it was when the house on the sand fell splat. As the real estate agents say, “location, location, location,” but if love does not build the house it won’t matter where you put it or how wide the trim might be.

Prayer: Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts, Almighty God, to rule and direct us according to your will, to comfort us in all our temptations and afflictions, to defend us from all error, and lead us into all truth; that we, being steadfast in the faith, may increase in love and in all good works, and in the end obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.