

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity (2022)

Who Is God's Son?

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“Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.”” (Matthew 22:41–42, ESV)

Shakespeare once said, *“Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows.”* This was the case with the Sadducees and the Pharisees, two groups of Israelites with differing theologies who were constantly at odds with one another and yet joined in their opposition to Jesus. There were also other groups who differed in theological opinions during the time of Christ, such as the Essenes of the second temple period and the Zealots during the life of Jesus. So the church of that time, filled with the opinions of men, was fractured and in disarray, headed in a direction that led souls away from salvation and heaven. This was the reason God sent our Lord Jesus to earth, to lead the church back onto the true path of salvation which came only by believing in His true and inerrant Word, that Word which promised the church a Savior. But as we see in today's Gospel Reading, the powers to be, weren't interested in the truth, instead they were interested in proving themselves right.

The Sadducees were the elite, liberals of Jesus' day. They rejected much of the supernatural truths of faith. They believed that the soul ceased to exist at death, therefore, no bodily resurrection. Their theology rejected angels and spirits, and unlike the Pharisees who relied on the observance of oral tradition, the Sadducees rejected them, esteeming only those obligatory traditions according to the Word of God. For by doing so, the Sadducees thought they could preserve their status as aristocratic priests. But this is strange because the Sadducees didn't come from the priestly tribe, the tribe of Levi. Instead they were priests according to the status of men. Church history tells us the Sadducees had very little support from among the common people, primarily their support came from the wealthy, upper class of Jerusalem.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, acknowledged the resurrection, angels, and spirits. Scripture tells us the Pharisee's sat on the seat of Moses, they fasted, they observed all the traditions of the elders (Mark 7:3), including the ritual of cleanliness, washing their hands prior to eating while simultaneously breaking the commandment of God regarding honoring father and mother (Matt. 15:3). But they thought that through such observances, they were righteous. The Pharisees on the outside looked very holy, but on the inside Christ called them ***“whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27)***. For the most part they were hypocrites and legalists.

In today's Gospel Reading, St. Matthew tells us that Jesus had just silenced the Sadducees. This was when they had asked their silly question regarding the resurrection. But Jesus silences them with his answer, saying, ***“You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God . . . And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.”*** (Matthew 22:29, 31–32, ESV) This was good news for the Pharisees, because their rivals had been shamed by Jesus and now, they would have the opportunity to show the people how much smarter they were by outsmarting this upstart, Jesus of

Nazareth. So they come to Jesus with the purpose of trapping Him by testing Him. Hoping to lead Him into a blasphemous error. Challenging His theology, they ask, ***“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”*** (Matthew 22:36, ESV) Now, in asking this question they really didn’t want a theological answer, no, they wanted Him to take one side or the other with one of their many religious quarrels with the Sadducees. Truth is, within Judaism there were hundreds of commandments, so they wanted to know which one Jesus thought was the most important. These Pharisees, these legalists, believed that God’s Law could be reduced to rules and regulations, and of course they had created more than enough of them, 613 to be exact. So out of these 613 rules they wanted Jesus to pick the one that was most important.

Not much has changed in these past two-thousand years. In today’s church we still have Pharisee’s and Sadducees, and we see threats against the revealed truth of God’s Word and our Christian faith from both sides, the left and the right. On the left we have the deniers of the holy mysteries of faith. In their obstinance, they challenge the inerrancy and inspiration of Holy Scripture, saying the Bible contains errors, denying the biblical account of Creation, the deity of Christ, and the exclusive claims of Jesus, saying they are bigoted and narrow-minded.

On the right we see the imposition of legal rules. If you claim to be a follower of Christ then you cannot smoke, you cannot drink, you cannot disobey any of a very long list of rules, which they claim to be drawn from the Scriptures but in reality they are only the traditions of men. One such area is in opposition to ecclesiastical art, which they call craven images. However, when we read God’s Word, we see that He demanded such objects be constructed as reminders of faith. When instructing the Hebrews regarding furnishing the Tabernacle, God commanded the construction of The Ark of the Covenant with its two Cherubs on the Mercy Seat. Even in His instructions concerning the building of the Tabernacle, God’s instructions included that artistic imagery (Ex. 35:32) be woven into the tapestry, the placement of the Golden Lampstand, the priestly garments, and so much more. God literally called men into the office of Tabernacle as designers (Ex. 31:4; 35:32), so it is clear that God did not consider these things craven images. While in the wilderness, when the people were dying from snake bite, God instructed Moses to create a ***“fiery serpent and set it on a pole”*** (Num. 21:8) so that anyone who was bitten could look on it and live. However, as men do, they profaned this object by worshipping it. So in the days of Hezekiah he had it torn down and broken into pieces. It took a thousand years, but man in his corruption, eventually corrupted what God had made for men prophesying the death of His holy Son on the Altar of the Cross. Jesus Himself affirmed this when He said, ***“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*** (John 3:14–15, ESV) No, no craven image here.

But today, the legalists would say that such objects violate God’s commandment against craven or ***“carved images”*** (Ex. 20:4). But God’s command in His explanation of the First Commandment was that His people were to make no images, of any kind, that they would bow down to and worship in His place. He says, ***“You shall not bow down to them or serve them,”*** (Exodus 20:5, ESV) So pretty much like the 613 commands of Judaism in the days of Jesus. The legalists turn the Gospel into Law, binding the consciences of men to their man-made rules. These so-called conservatives add their own traditions to the clear teaching of God’s Word, while the so-called liberals subtract from the clear teaching of God’s Word. Sadly, we still have the Sadducees and Pharisees among us today.

In responding to the question from the Pharisees, Jesus said, ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”*** (Matthew 22:37–40, ESV) Our Lord’s answer is both simple and radical. He ignores the 613 rules of Judaism and reduces them

to just two. Jesus goes back to Scripture, specifically the law of Moses, and recites for them what every student of the catechism class knows by heart.

Our Lord's answer shows that we cannot reduce God's Law to rules. The love that God requires of us is far greater than the boundaries and rules of men. God's Law is not just a matter of doing and not doing, instead, it is a matter of loving with our whole heart, our whole life, and our whole mind. But if you are focused on what you desire most, what matters to you the most in your daily living, what occupies your thoughts, then these things become your god. But the God who created us, who redeemed us, and who sanctifies us, demands from us all that we are and all that we have, for all we are and all we have is already His. Giving it back to Him is not an option, it is an obligation.

However, because of our sinful flesh we are unable to do as God desires, so in our failure we devise dishonest ways of pretending that we have done what He desires. This is why man creates religious rules that ignore the demand to love God above all things and to love our neighbor our ourselves. Such rules are designed to be a façade of obedience when underneath the religious covering is nothing but deceit and hypocrisy.

This radical nature of God's Law makes sinners of us all. You can obey all the rules ever created by man, but in doing so you have not yet begun to obey God or fulfill His Law of loving Him above all things and loving your neighbor as yourself. Love is the requirement of God's Law, and no number of rules can turn a stone-cold heart into a heart of love, a heart that loves God and neighbor.

Only our Lord Jesus could fulfill these two great commandments. But when Jesus asked the Pharisees who the Christ was, it became immediately clear that they had no idea. Oh, sure, they knew that He was David's son. But there was much more to know than that the Christ would be a descendant of David. David's son was also David's Lord, and Jesus asked, ***"How is it then that David, in the Spirit, calls him Lord."*** (*Matthew 22:43, ESV*) Can you explain that? No, they couldn't. However, much worse, they didn't care. They didn't want to know how David's son could be David's Lord. Isn't it curious, that these religious leaders of Israel, didn't want to know? The answer is easy, their religion was a religion of do's and don'ts. Their religion had nothing to do with Christ and the promises of the Gospel.

What an important question, "Who is the Christ?" When Jesus asked His apostles this question, St. Peter answered, ***"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."*** (*Matthew 16:16, ESV*) But today, when you ask those who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ the question, *"Who is God's Son?"* you get a plethora of answers. Most of which are wrong. All too often the answer is, he was a good man. Sad.

So today it is no longer a question of who a Sadducee or Pharisee is, but who is orthodox. Sadducees and Pharisees today are those who are either heterodox or heretical. As I said earlier, Jesus came to earth to save man from himself, from his false worship, his failure to rightly understand the Word of God. Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught truth through the pure teaching of Law and Gospel, this the Sadducee's and Pharisee's disagreed with, therefore, they disagreed with Jesus and sought His death. Thank God, the Sadducee's, and Pharisee's failed in their desire to lead the Church astray by killing Christ.

Yes, it's true, they put Jesus on the cross and killed Him, but their perceived victory led to their defeat. For by crucifying God's only begotten Son, they fulfilled the desire of God to offer His Son as a ransom for our sin.

No matter how hard they tried, no matter how many laws they created, man could not fulfill the Law of God, only the Son of God, the Second Person of the Godhead, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ could, and did. How easily we forget that before He took on our flesh He was already exalted, divine, filled with a glory and majesty unknown on earth. He was God before time was created. But to fulfill the desire of the Father, He gave up His exalted glory and humbled Himself to come to us on earth, humbly taking upon Himself our flesh. Not our sinful, corrupted flesh as some foolishly believe, but sinless flesh, the flesh of the newly created Adam. God and man united in the one Person, Jesus Christ. He humbled Himself becoming one of us, a man, so that He could live vicariously for us, fulfilling the Law in our place, and then, in the depth of humiliation, offering Himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins, appeasing the wrath of God so we could be forgiven of all our sins. Those sins which we brought upon ourselves by creating laws we thought we could obey, by loving ourselves more than we loved God and neighbor, thereby failing to fulfill God's Law of loving Him above all things or loving our neighbor as ourselves. Only the God/man, our beloved Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, loved God with His whole heart, soul, and mind. It was only He who fulfilled the Law, undistracted by the rules of men, while loving us more than He loved Himself. And because we are unable to love as God has commanded, He sent His beloved Son to receive the agonizing pain we so richly deserve for our unloving attitude and our sinfulness.

The religion of the Sadducee was a religion of mockers, men who were too smart in their own estimation, unwilling to submit in humble faith to mysteries beyond their understanding. This is the religion of the elite, the intelligentsia, the politically powerful but spiritually empty leaders of the church and the world. Professing to be wise, they make themselves fools. Such as these today represent a true threat to the truth of Christianity.

But it is the religion of the legalistic Pharisee's that is an even greater threat. Bible-believing Christians are rightly concerned with the moral decay that is rampant in our culture; man trying to play God through an alternate reality of Creation. Therefore, many calling themselves Christian say, we need more rules! We need more legalism to counteract the liberalism that surrounds us on every side. But this is a wrong-headed idea.

Instead of legalism the antidote for such spiritual poison is not an additional dose of spiritual poison. Let us not forget, legalism is poison for the soul. Christians have no right to replace God's radical requirements of love with the doable rules that religious people have invented and substituted for God's Word. Rather, we must continue to seek instruction from God on how we are to love. God instructs us to turn to His Word, to the Ten Commandments which require perfect love, love of God, love of neighbor. But we know that we're incapable of living up to God's command of loving Him with our whole heart, soul, and mind and our neighbor as ourselves. For only Jesus could fulfill this command. But out of His abounding grace and mercy, God does not first and foremost condemn us but rather He calls us by the Gospel to repentance, He calls us to confess our sin and to rely on His Son's victory over sin, death, and the devil by His excruciating death on the Altar of the Cross for the forgiveness of our sin. For it was there that He not only defeated Satan, but He defeated all those who would add rules and regulations to God's holy Word as additional requirements for salvation.

So rather than look to ourselves, to our intelligence, our elitism or our law-making, the Holy Spirit calls us and leads us to look to the One who fulfilled all things for us, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, He *Who Is God's Son*, purchased our salvation and won us from all sin, from death, and the power of the devil, not by ingenious laws and regulations, but solely by His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. Given the gift of faith to believe in the atoning sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ upon the Altar of the Cross for the forgiveness of our sin, how could we not at least make every effort to do what Christ said we should do: "Love the

Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . and love your neighbor as yourself.” As we have been loved and forgiven, let us also love and forgive? In the name of Jesus. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.